INSIDE: THE 2014 FARM BILL'S GOOD NEWS

Montana Outdoors

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SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 2014

GONE MISSING

Can we lure elk back to our national forests?

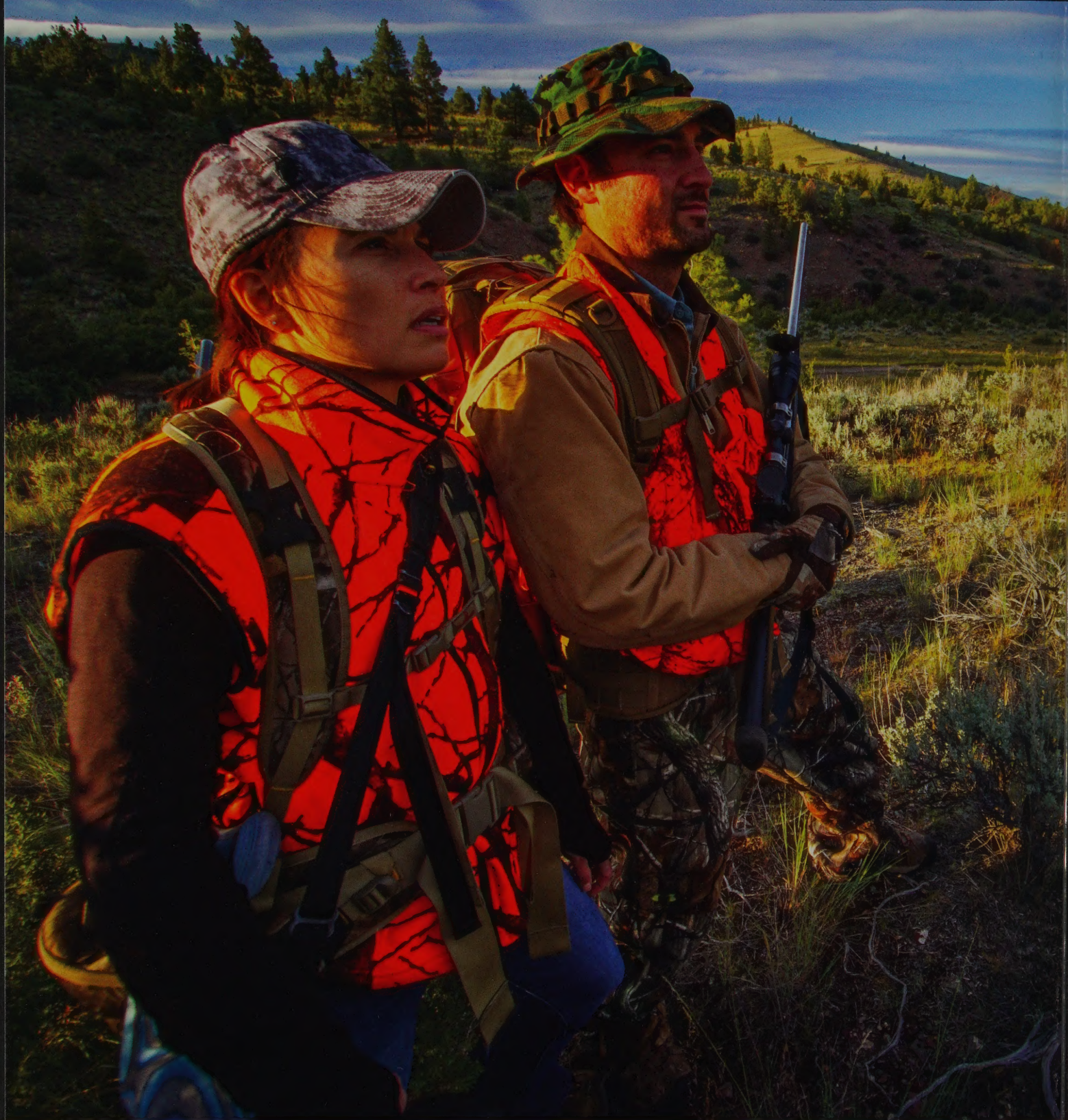
IN THIS ISSUE:

GETTING TO "YES" WITH LANDOWNERS

MONTANA'S LUCKIEST UNLUCKY HUNTER?

McKEAN LAMENTS THE POSSIBLE END OF AN ERA

CRACKING THE CODE OF ISOLATED PUBLIC HUNTING LANDS



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Montana Outdoors

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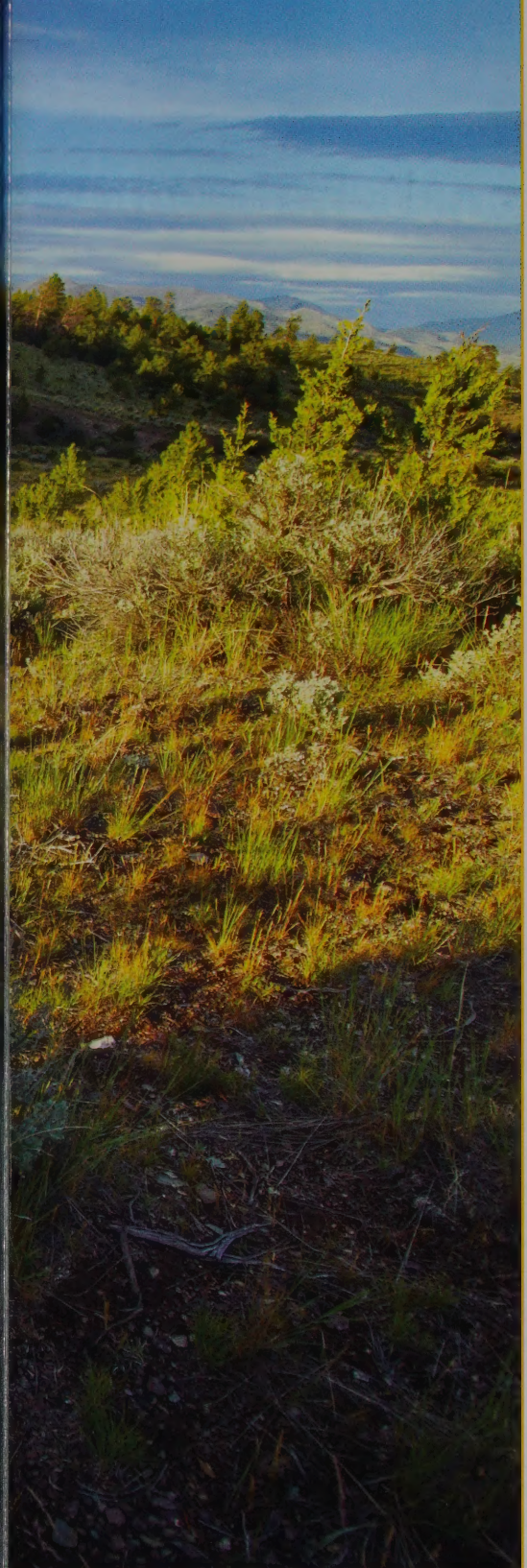

HERE WE GO
Husband and wife hunting partners prepare to hunt elk in the Big Belts north of Helena. See page 18 to read why getting to the hunt may be as fulfilling as the hunt itself. Photo by Matthew Rowley.

FRONT COVER
Elk are increasingly leaving public forests for private land. See page 32 to learn what might be done to reverse the trend. Photo by Donald M. Jones.

Sweet memories

The July-August 2014 issue came in the mail today and, as usual, the articles, photographs, and regular columns brought a tear or two to the aging eyes of this guy who was born and raised, and then worked and lived, in Montana for the first 40-some years of his life. Wonderful magazine.

I took special interest in the "Untrammeled" essay by Hal Herring, about the Wilderness Act of 1964. I was actively involved with the Montana Wilderness Association during its infancy in the late 1950s, and all of us helped with the efforts to get the Wilderness Act passed. We were on a first-name basis with Mike Mansfield, Lee Metcalf, and Jim Battin in those days. Exciting times.

Cheers, and thanks for the continuing excellence of *Montana Outdoors*.

J. Nevin Thompson
Groveland, FL

Your essay "Sweet Surroundings," in the May-June issue, touched me very deeply. Growing up in Great Falls in the late 1940s and early '50s, after my dad came home from military service, we fished a lot. In those days, we were fly-fishing before fly-fishing was cool, because it was all we knew. We loved the Blackfoot River, the spring-fed creeks south of Lincoln, Highwood Creek east of Great Falls, and Sheep Creek over Kings Hill, to the south. Looking back, it was so fulfilling to walk around a bend in the stream and come upon an unsuspecting bird or other animal, or to just sit on a rock or the bank and watch the clear, cold water pass by. Enjoying the trout, fried over a campfire in the evening, made the day. You brought back some fond memories.

Also, the two-page image lead for the article "Untrammeled," in the July-August issue, is incredible. Kudos to photographer Jesse Lee Varnado for capturing it and to your art director for using it in such an appropriate way. Hal Herring's essay is quite good also.

Harry Johnson
Redwood Falls, MN

Waterproof "grizzly"

I loved the picture of the Iceberg Lake Trail in the article "Bedtime in the Backcountry" (July-August). That was always one of my favorite trails in Glacier National Park. One time while I was coming down the trail, a light rain started and I pulled on a reddish-brown poncho over my body and daypack. As I walked, I started noticing people far down the trail turning around and going back. When I reached the trailhead, someone told me not to go up that trail, because people had seen a grizzly coming down it. I guess I ruined the hike for a bunch of people.

> "As I walked, I started noticing people far down the trail turning around and going back."

Arnold Guenther
Nekoosa, WI

On FWP's budget woes

Page 8 of the July-August issue mentions FWP's funding dilemma. In the same article, you mention a booklet about the dilemma available to the public. That "free" booklet obviously cost money to produce. On the following page another "free" publication, an elk guide, is offered. The article on the guide mentions the difficulty many hunters have in figuring out the licensing process. Maybe you should start reading your own magazine to get ideas on how to save money and leave the price of hunting licenses alone. Also, your increase in out-of-state licenses and the non-guarantee for outfitter licenses are also playing a part in your shortfall.

Jeremy Taylor
Lakeside

My hunting companions and I have bought the Montana Big Game Combination tag for the past two seasons, but no more. It has nothing to do with declining game numbers or with wolves. Just as inflation has increased your cost of managing big game, so has it increased our cost of hunting big game. For instance, the higher-priced fuel that goes into a game warden's truck is the same increasingly expensive commodity that goes into the trucks of hunters like us, who are average wage earners.

Montana increased the nonresident big game license fees in 2011 and, since then, your revenue has remained flat. That should tell you something other than that the economy was weak or you had a couple of tough winters, which you blame for declining nonresident license sales. The bottom line is that your nonresident fee increase was too much in too short a time. You have priced out my future participation, and it seems others have made the same decision. Maybe the resident hunters will agree to pick up the difference.

Paul Reichardt
Ontonagon, Michigan

We received several letters from nonresident hunters who pointed out that Montana increased the cost of its nonresident deer and elk hunting licenses by roughly $200 to $270 (depending on the license) in 2011, and that the increase may be responsible for declining nonresident license sales ever since.

Regarding the possibility of a hunting and fishing fee increase: I hope we see cuts in your budget that at least match the increase you are asking us to pay.

Dean A. Hazuka
Marion

Write to us

We welcome all your comments, questions, and letters to the editor. We'll edit letters as needed for accuracy, style, and length. Reach us at Montana Outdoors, P.O. Box 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701. Or email: tdickson@mt.gov.

Blue Grouse and Shallots

By Tom Dickson | Preparation Time: **10 min.** | Cooking Time: **50 min.** | Serves: **4–6**

Like many hunting dog owners, I'm counting down the days to the upland bird opener. But unlike most, I won't be heading to the prairie in search of Huns and sharpies. My wire-haired pointing griffon puppy struggles in hot weather, panting and seeking shade when temperatures exceed 75 degrees. And I'm afraid that she or my springer will be bitten by a rattlesnake, even though I've put both through the ordeal of "snake break" clinics, which use a defanged rattler and several zaps from a shock collar to, in theory, scare them away from anything that slithers.

So it's off to the mountains for me and the dogs to hunt blue grouse and maybe a ruffed grouse or two.

That's fine by me. I'm not much of an elk hunter (too much work), so chasing mountain grouse gives me a chance to roam the high country with gun in hand when the air is clean and sweet. And because it's cooler and holds more water than the parched prairie, the dogs seem to like it better there.

Then there's the blue grouse themselves, which hold readily for a point (this I know only from hearsay, having never shot one that way), offer challenging hillside shots (this I have done), and taste better in the pot than any other upland species except the equally delectable ruffed grouse (as I and many others will attest).

A friend roasts his plucked blue grouse whole in the oven, dabbing the browning skin with melted butter like it's a little holiday turkey. That's a great way to go, but I prefer a little more flavor with my bird. That's why I recommend this easy, delicious, one-pot recipe that ran in the *New York Times* last year. It originated with Martha Stewart and was revised by Rishia Zimmern of Edina, Minnesota, wife of TV cooking celebrity Andrew Zimmern.

—Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

I've slightly reduced the cooking time in this recipe, which originally called for chicken thighs, to account for the drier meat of game birds. Pheasant breasts work well, too.

Note: If you have just one grouse or pheasant, cut the ingredients to one-third of what's listed here and reduce the cooking times by half.

INGREDIENTS

6 bone-in blue grouse breasts (from three birds)
4 T. flour
1 T. kosher salt
1 T. ground black pepper
6 T. unsalted butter
12 to 15 whole medium shallots*, peeled
2 c. white wine
2 T. Dijon mustard
2 sprigs fresh tarragon (or 2 t. dried)
2 c. cherry tomatoes, halved

*These smaller, tastier, and milder relatives of the onion cost a bit more than onions but are well worth the price.

DIRECTIONS

1. Rinse the grouse breasts in water and pat very dry with paper towels. In a shallow bowl, mix salt, pepper, and flour. Dredge the breasts in the seasoned flour.

2. Melt 3 T. butter in a large, heavy-bottomed pot or skillet set over medium-high heat. When the butter foams, cook the grouse, in batches if necessary, until well browned. Set aside.

3. Add remaining butter to pot and heat to foaming. Add the whole shallots to the pot and sauté until they soften and caramelize, approximately 10 minutes. Add the wine to deglaze the pot, stirring with a large spoon, then add the mustard and tarragon, then the grouse breasts. Cover the pot, turn the heat to low, and simmer for 10 minutes.

4. Remove the lid and allow the sauce to reduce and thicken, about 15 minutes.

5. Add the cherry tomatoes to the pot, stir lightly to combine, and serve immediately with crusty bread (to soak up the sauce) or over mashed potatoes.

CHRISTOPHER TESTANI

Sage-grouse season closures reflect FWP's concern about number declines

On page 29 of this issue, *Outdoor Life* editor and Glasgow-area resident Andrew McKean laments the closure of sage-grouse hunting over much of the species' range in Montana. And rightly so. The loss of any hunting opportunity is a serious matter. But of even greater consequence would be for these grand birds of the sagebrush-steppe to be listed as federally threatened or endangered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), an outcome that's very possible.

In July the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission voted to close the sage-grouse season in southeastern and south-central Montana and northern Montana north of U.S. Highway 2, and shorten the season from 60 to 30 days elsewhere. The measure comes at a time when sage-grouse in large parts of the state are rapidly declining. Since 2008, numbers have dropped statewide from roughly 34 males per breeding lek to about 13 males per lek this year.

Declines over the past several decades have been even worse in the other ten western states where the bird lives. The USFWS is looking at all the states as a whole. Thanks to abundant habitat, in many cases kept healthy by well-managed cattle grazing, Montana has the second-highest number of sage-grouse in the West (only Wyoming has more). But if the sage-grouse is listed, it will be listed in all states, not just those where the bird has grown most scarce.

Though the USFWS has said that hunting is not a major threat, it is important for us to show that Montana takes the recent declines seriously.

The listing of sage-grouse would be hugely unpopular in Montana. Under provisions of the Endangered Species Act, the USFWS would have to severely restrict grazing and energy development on BLM and other federal lands. Sagebrush alterations on private property would be punishable by steep fines and even jail time. And we would lose our management authority, including the ability to allow any hunting.

Though the USFWS has said that hunting is not a major threat to the birds' populations, it is important for us to show that Montana takes recent declines here seriously. Sage-grouse numbers in some areas have steadily dropped over the past six years due to weather, sagebrush prairie eradication, and possibly disease. We don't think it's right to continue hunting birds in these areas at this time.

Still, as hunters know and scientific studies have verified, the big issue is habitat, not hunting. The main reason for long-term sage-grouse reductions in Montana is habitat loss—mainly from burning sagebrush to create more cattle pasture and tilling it to plant crops. Over the past several months, a governor-appointed citizen's work group has developed a plan to prevent the sage-grouse from being listed, primarily through sagebrush-steppe conservation. Among the group's main recommendations:

- Focus on conserving core habitat and connectivity areas
- Respect all valid, existing land uses and rights in these areas
- Require any new developments or land use requiring a permit—such as oil and gas drilling on state lands—to show that it will not harm sage-grouse populations.

Governor Steve Bullock is considering these and other recommendations, and will issue his executive order on sage-grouse conservation this fall.

Also at work is the federal Sage-Grouse Initiative, run by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, created in 2010 to conserve and restore remaining sagebrush grasslands. So far the program has spent $150 million across the West. Partners, including such disparate groups as the National Audubon Society and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, have contributed another $75 million total.

In addition, over the past several years FWP has purchased 30-year conservation leases on 200,000 acres of sage-grouse habitat from willing landowners.

We believe that these and other conservation efforts by agencies, livestock operators, and private groups, along with the directives from Governor Bullock's executive order, will ensure sage-grouse survival long into Montana's future. But at this point it's up to USFWS leaders, who are scheduled to make a decision some time in 2015. If they don't agree and decide to list the bird after all, we may look back at this year's partial season closures and consider them part of the good ol' days of sage-grouse hunting in Montana.

—**M. Jeff Hagener,** *Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Director*

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM

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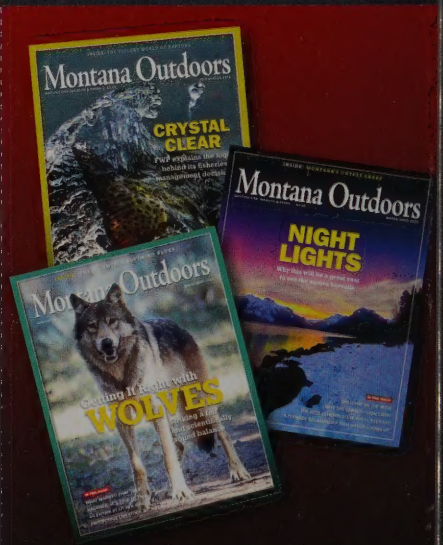

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MATTHEW ROWLEY

ACCESS ENABLER

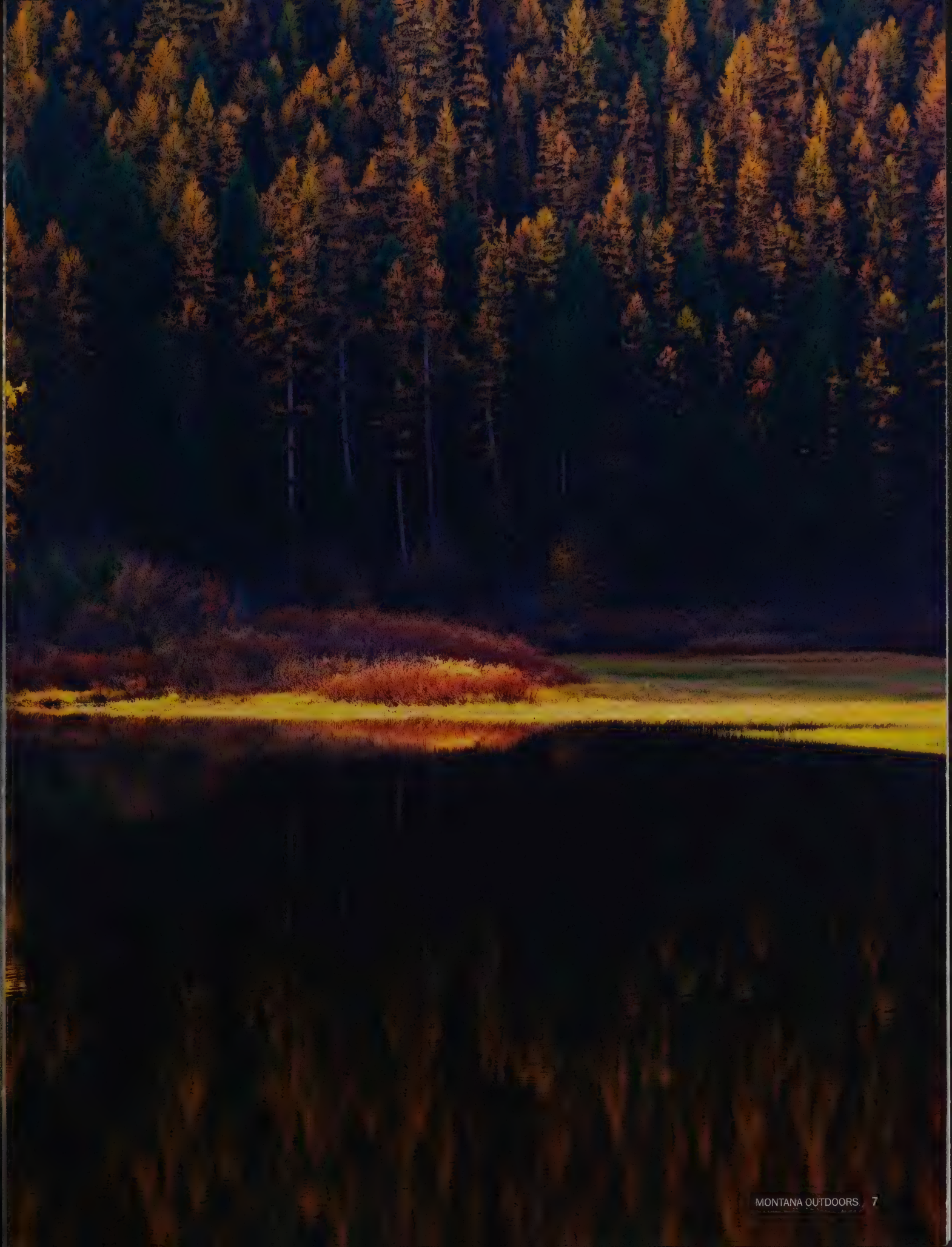
KEN FARTHING
Regional Block Management Coordinator, Great Falls

I'm FWP's senior regional Block Management coordinator, having worked in this position for 17 years. Like the other five coordinators, I'm mainly responsible for maintaining relations with landowner cooperators. Here in Region 4 (north-central Montana), I have 218 contracts covering 1.3 million acres, averaging about 89,000 hunter days annually for the last four years.

Our season starts in January, when we begin collecting hunting records from cooperators from the previous season. FWP makes "impact payments" based on hunter usage, so we go through all the coupons, permission slips, and cards to tabulate the number of hunter days for each cooperator. In spring we negotiate our contracts with the landowners, making sure each contract complies with various state laws, rules, and policies, all the while coordinating with other state and federal agencies that may have an interest in the contracts. That's also when we build new access maps and adjust existing ones if needed.

In late July the access guides are compiled and printed. In mid-August we mail copies of the guides and maps to everyone who has requested them and make the information available on the FWP website. Once hunting season starts, I'm out with the hunting access technicians monitoring Block Management Areas, checking sign-in boxes and signs, and helping hunters. We are also constantly in contact with cooperators to address any problems they might have. Our surveys show that most of them are very pleased with the way the program manages hunting access on their land, which is their main concern. Overall satisfaction by both landowners and hunters is generally very high, so it appears we're doing a good job out here.

Helena photographer **JASON SAVAGE** was heading north on Montana Highway 83 to lead a photography workshop in Bigfork when he drove past Salmon Lake and stopped at a pullout to photograph the scenic site. "It was mid-October, and I was looking at all those larch (tamaracks) on the far shore and that lone tree on the small island," he says. "It was a partly cloudy day, and I could see that a ray of sun breaking through the clouds might light up that tree while the others in the background remained in the shade. And luckily it happened. To top it off, there was almost no wind on the lake, so I also got that great reflection of the tree in the calm water." ■



40-45%

Percent yield, in finished steaks, roasts, and burger, of a field-dressed elk or deer by most commercial game processors.

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WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

Who sets Montana's elk "objectives"?

FWP officials talk a lot about elk numbers being over or under "objective"—meaning too many or not enough elk in a hunting district.

But what is the objective, and how does FWP arrive at that number?

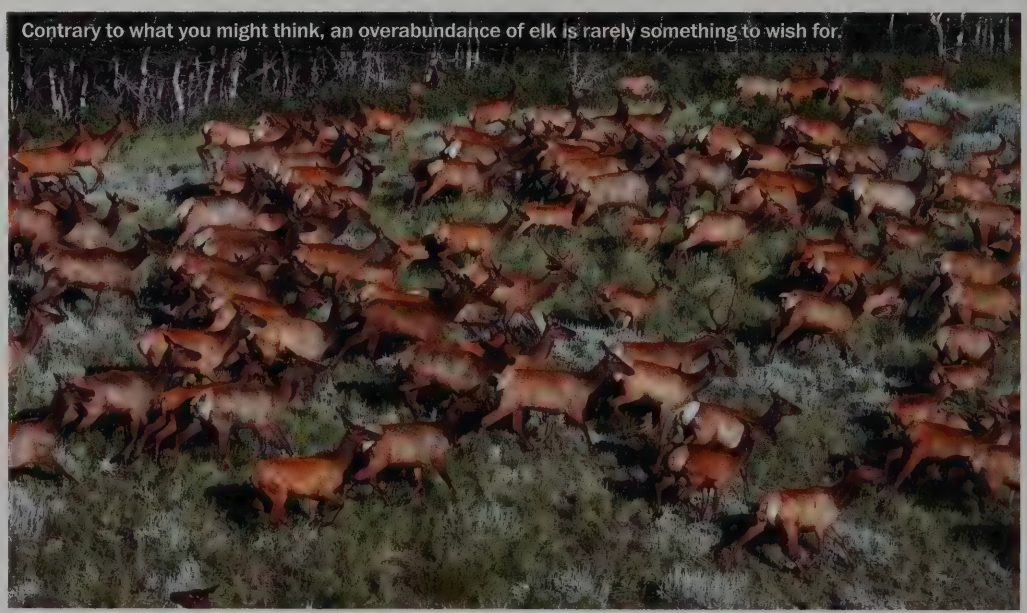
Ken McDonald, head of the FWP Wildlife Division, explains that each objective is a target population mostly based on two factors: the biological carrying capacity of the habitat and the social tolerance of landowners.

"Our biologists have a sense of how many elk an area will carry before the animals start degrading their own habitat," he says. "And that can change from year to year, depending on moisture and other conditions."

As for the social "carrying capacity," McDonald notes that, by law, landowners must allow some wildlife depredation, but not undue levels. He says biologists consult with landowners to determine if elk numbers are too high and causing problems, such as eating hay bales and trampling fences.

Of course, hunters always want to see more elk, but McDonald notes that more isn't always better. "Hunters might think that having elk populations over objective is always a good thing, because that means more elk for them," he explains. "But it's often just the opposite. Too many elk can eat themselves out of house and home, reducing winter survival and calf recruitment. Or they do so much damage that relations with landowners sour, resulting in more access restrictions. Even worse, the Montana Legislature can intervene and mandate extreme harvests in some areas, as we saw in the mid-2000s. So it really is in everyone's best interest for us to keep elk populations at objective."

McDonald notes that elk objectives were originally set in FWP's 2004 Elk Management Plan, which outlined a public process, conducted through the Fish and Wildlife Commission, for raising or lowering objectives in the future. "The only way people can change objectives in a hunting district is to make an official request to the commission," he says. ■



Contrary to what you might think, an overabundance of elk is rarely something to wish for.

Welcome aboard

While adult hunters prepare to test their skills in the months ahead, several thousand young Montanans have just finished taking their all-important hunting education test. Wayde Cooperider, head of the FWP Hunter Education Program, says that about 3,000 students statewide graduated from recent late-summer courses. The kids spent 12 to 18 hours in class, usually in evenings and on a weekend field day. They were taught by volunteer instructors, who spend hours prepping for classes and supplement course materials with their own hunting packs, survival gear, binoculars, and other personal items.

"Our Hunter Ed and Bowhunter Ed instructors receive absolutely no financial compensation," says Cooperider. "It's all done out of their passion for

Is the Yellowstone-region grizzly ready for delisting? Students will decide.

CONSERVATION EDUCATION

Students answer thorny bear question

This fall, high school students across Montana will decide whether it's time to remove grizzly bears in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem from federal protection under the Endangered Species Act.

They'll make their decision based on information they gather and analyze as part of a new educational lesson plan developed by Missoula-based Bear Trust International, the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, FWP, Wildlife Management Institute, and other organizations.

"A goal of the lesson plan is to hone students' critical thinking," says Melissa Reynolds-Hogland, executive director of Bear Trust International. "They decide for themselves what should happen to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem grizzly population based on their analysis of the facts."

In the lesson plan, Reynolds-Hogland says, participating high school students learn about the three recovery criteria for delisting the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem grizzly population as well as information about grizzly populations in other recovery zones. The students then work in one of three teams, each of which covers one of the recovery criteria. After analyzing scientific information, the teams make presentations to each other on whether the bear population meets the federal delisting standards. Finally, the class as a whole analyzes the information from all three presentations and determines, based on scientific data, if the population should remain a federally threatened species or be delisted.

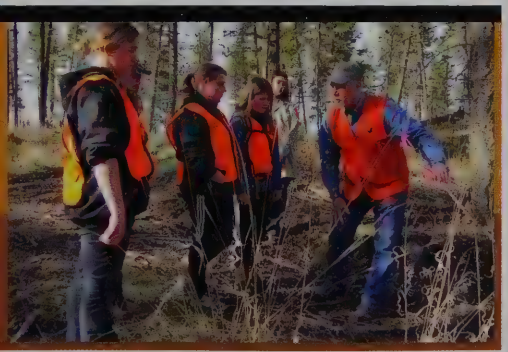
A component of the state's STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education initiative, "Grizzly Bear: Ready for Delisting?" combines science and math with a topical issue to engage students. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service will likely decide in the next few years whether to delist the grizzly in the Yellowstone area. Montana and many conservation groups say the population has recovered and no longer needs full protection under the Endangered Species Act. Environmental groups claim otherwise, stating that the population is still too small and vulnerable to be handed over for state management.

High school students will soon be making up their own minds on the issue. ■

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE MORAN; TONY BYNUM; SHUTTERSTOCK; JOHN FRALEY/FWP; DENVER BRYAN

hunting, safety, and conservation."

Cooperider adds that FWP is always looking for new volunteer Hunter Ed and Bowhunter Ed instructors, especially in smaller communities. Learn how to volunteer at fwp.mt.gov/education/hunter/instructors. ■



A volunteer Hunter Ed instructor teaches students how to track a wounded animal. Recently about 3,000 students graduated from classes across Montana.

Weigh in to conserve wildlife on BLM lands

Hunters and other wildlife advocates could see more big game animals down the road on millions of acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) holdings in Montana and elsewhere in the West. But first they need to make themselves heard.

The federal agency is now updating its 40-year-old land-use plans. Hunters and others are invited to weigh in. Joel Webster, who oversees public lands work for the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, says the plan revision process is a great opportunity for sportsmen to ensure that key elk, mule deer, pronghorn, and other wildlife habitats and migration corridors are responsibly managed.

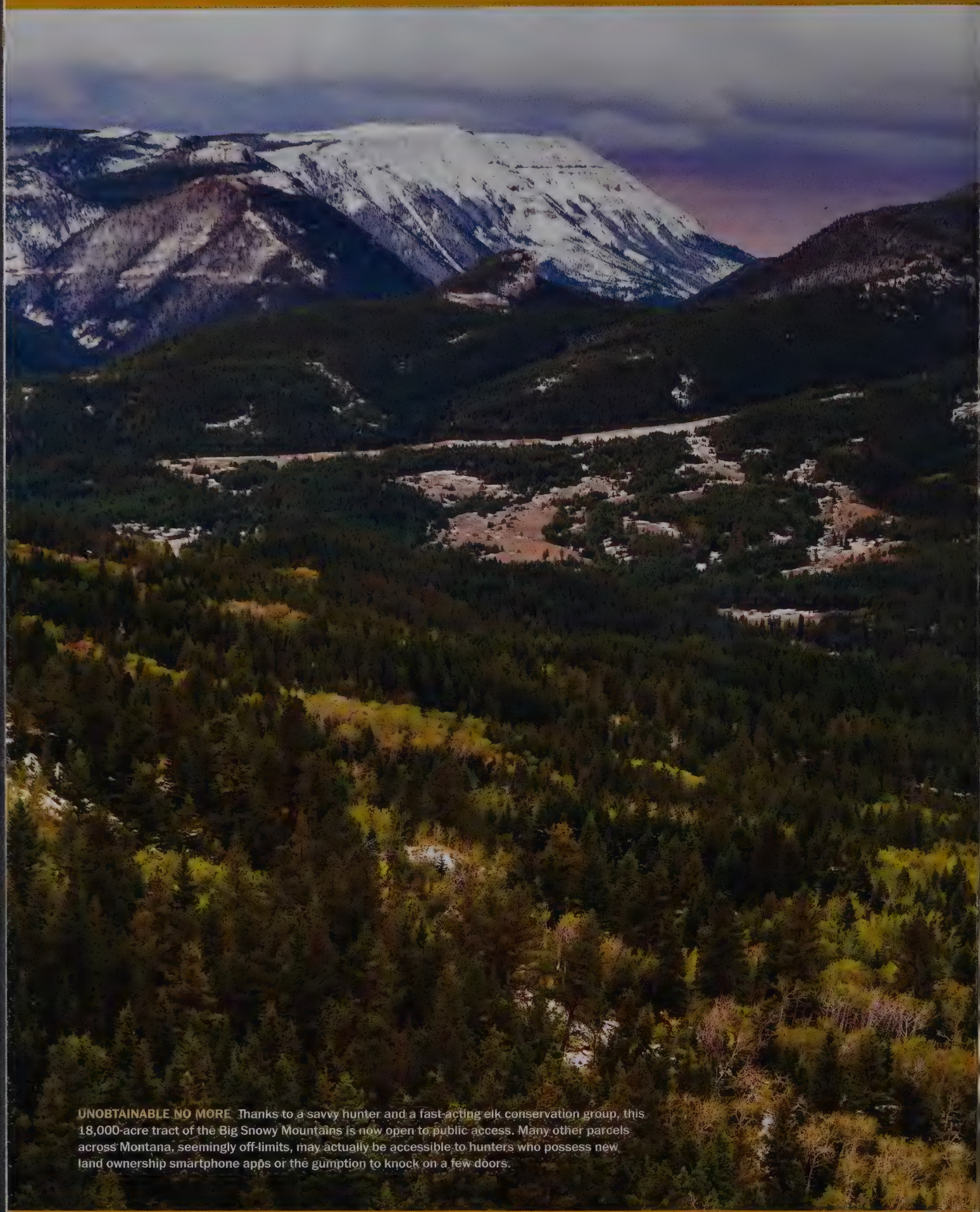
Says Webster, who is based in Missoula, "Essentially, the BLM's individual resource management plans determine how and if wildlife habitat conservation and management—such as protection of key winter range—will be carried out on specific holdings."

Webster concedes that planning sounds dull, "but it's at the core of what does or doesn't happen on the ground, and this planning revision will affect all BLM lands in Montana and elsewhere in the West."

Webster adds that another key issue that sportsmen could influence is the amount and location of energy development on BLM lands.

Learn how to be a voice for wildlife in the BLM's planning process by contacting Webster at (406) 360-3904 or jwebster@trcp.org. ■

Planning can be a bore—except when it affects 8 million acres of wildlife habitat on BLM lands across Montana.



UNOBTAINABLE NO MORE Thanks to a savvy hunter and a fast-acting elk conservation group, this 18,000-acre tract of the Big Snowy Mountains is now open to public access. Many other parcels across Montana, seemingly off-limits, may actually be accessible to hunters who possess new land ownership smartphone apps or the gumption to knock on a few doors.

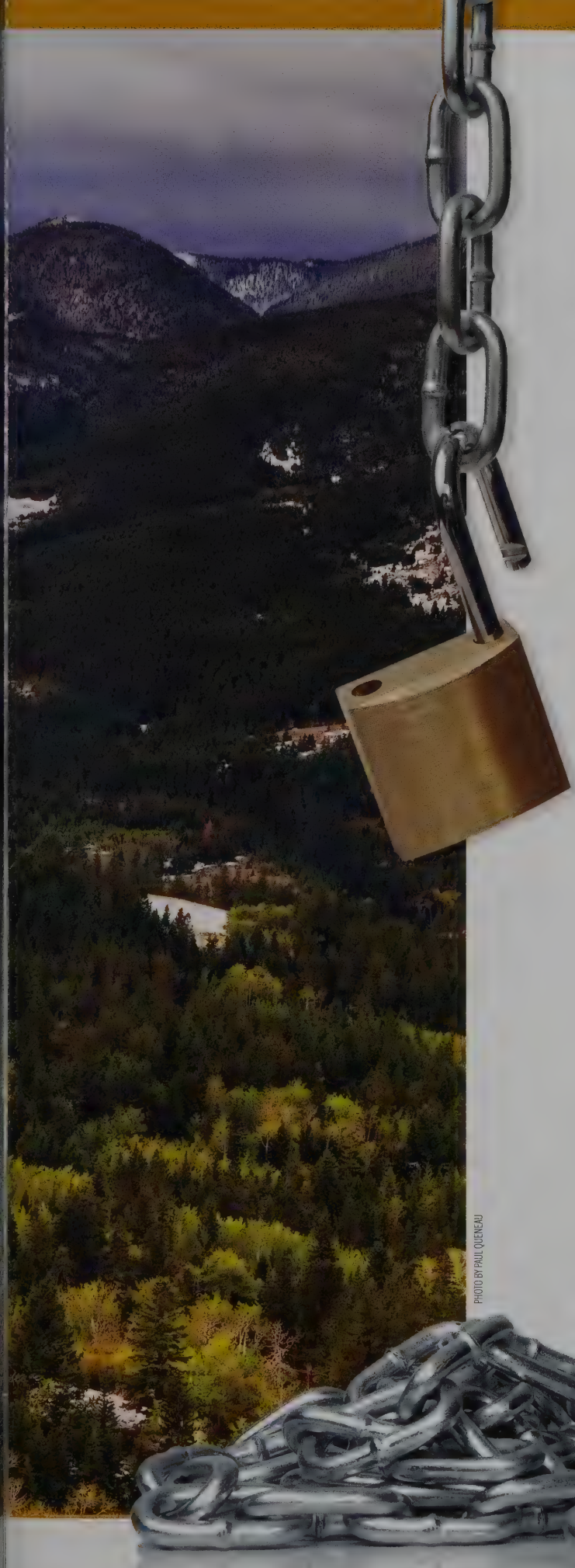


PHOTO BY PAUL QUENEAU

Finding a Way In

Millions of acres of public hunting land in Montana appear inaccessible. How hunters and others are figuring out ways to get there. **By Paul Queneau**

Lewistown bowhunter Kevin Kepler is a map-reading whiz. Twenty-one years as a U.S. Army pilot will do that to a fellow. So it's perhaps not surprising that, of all the hunters looking for ways to access portions of the nearby Big Snowy Mountains isolated by surrounding private land, it was Kepler who figured out a way to open up 18,000 acres of prime elk country to himself.

And, eventually, to everyone else.

For years the retired military aviator had been eyeing a vast tract of national forest—prime elk, mule deer, and black bear habitat cloaked in pines, aspens, and mountain meadows—tucked back in the Lewis and Clark National Forest. But after scouting the area on foot, Kepler knew that a cliff-faced canyon created a nearly impenetrable barrier.

Then, a few years ago, he spotted on a land ownership map what appeared to be a "back door" into that all-but-inaccessible U.S. Forest Service land. An oddity in the township grid caused a tiny 40-acre private tract along Red Hill Road, south of Lewistown, to overlap, for a mere 10 yards at one misaligned corner, with the national forest beyond. Parcels that meet at an exact corner can't be legally crossed without permission from all adjoining landowners, so the overlap proved crucial. It meant that Kepler would need permission from just one.

He called the parcel's owners, Marshall and Leslie Long, Montana natives living out of state. He struck up a conversation and eventually popped the access question. "No problem," the Longs told Kepler. They didn't ask for a trespass fee, just an over-the-phone handshake. Kepler spent the next two seasons hunting above the Longs' property. He pretty much had the entire 18,000-acre tract of national forest to himself and his family members.

Then he learned that the Longs had put the land up for sale. With the asking price well beyond his

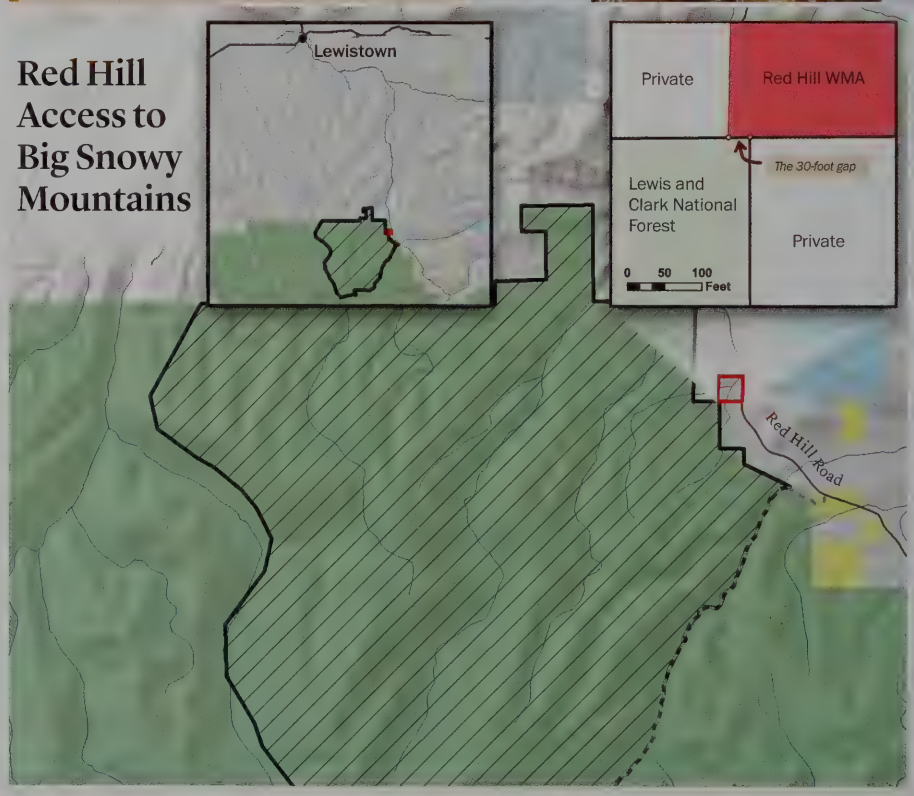
budget, Kepler contacted the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF), of which he is a member. The Missoula-based organization, which has secured public access to more than 700,000 acres of elk country across the United States over the past 30 years, jumped at the opportunity, partnering with Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the Forest Service on the project. RMEF paid the $190,000 asking price, then sold the land to FWP for $50,000. Acquisition by the department ensured that the 40 acres, now called the Red Hill Wildlife Management Area, is open to hunting and year-round recreation access. Even more important, it provides a gateway to the national forest lands. "This gives the public access to some of the most incredible country in central Montana," says David Allen, RMEF president and CEO. For their part, the Longs say they were pleased to know their land would be protected and, along with the adjacent national forest block, open to all.

30 FEET TO PARADISE Right and below: Lewistown bowhunter Kevin Kepler was the first to figure out that a 30-foot gap between misaligned corners of a 40-acre tract of private land could, with permission to cross the property, allow him to reach 18,000 acres of Lewis and Clark National Forest. He later instigated a lengthy acquisition process by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and then FWP that resulted in the tract becoming the Red Hill Wildlife Management Area south of Lewistown (above) and opening up thousands of acres of public national forest land. "As sportsmen, we must make sure we have a voice," says Kepler. "We have the ability to make a positive impact on access. All we have to do is look around and have the situational awareness to see these opportunities."

FINDING THE STRANDED LANDS

The Red Hill project represents just one way that hunters, conservation groups, and public agencies help people reach seemingly inaccessible public holdings. Though Montana contains more than 30 million acres of state and federal land, much of it sees little use by hunters. Some isolated or apparently inaccessible parcels are stranded by cliffs, rivers, or other natural barriers. Many are unmarked and unknown to most hunters. Others appear too small or out of the way to make hunting worth the effort. And a growing amount of public land, like much of the Snowy Mountains, is surrounded or otherwise blocked by private property and requires landowner permission for access.

Demand to reach isolated and oft-ignored public hunting land is growing. Reduced hunter access to private property has created a cascade effect, putting more pressure on public lands. That forces hunters to be more creative in finding overlooked parcels that might hold game. It has also spurred FWP and private groups to devise new ways for hunters to find their



ALL PHOTOS PAGE 12: ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK FOUNDATION; PAGE 13: MONTANA OUTDOORS

Paul Queneau is conservation editor of Bugle, *the magazine of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. He lives in Missoula.*

way onto the nearly 2 million acres of public lands surrounded by private holdings without guaranteed access (see sidebar, page 14).

Most of these isolated public parcels are state school trust lands, managed by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. In 1889, Congress granted to Montana more than 5 million acres of federal land comprising 1-square-mile sections for the state to lease for grazing, mining, and logging. The revenue Montana generates from leasing school trust lands, often identifiable as blue squares marked 16 and 36 on township grids, goes to college and K–12 education.

It's hard to hunt these and other public holdings if you don't know they're there. Fortunately, GPS devices and smartphone apps loaded with land ownership maps make locating public land and staying inside legal boundaries easy. At least two Montana companies sell electronic maps that display property boundaries, landowner names, game management and hunting units, as well as topography, roads, trails, waterways, and other geographic features. The digital maps work in PCs and Macs, many Garmin GPS handheld units, and Apple and Android phones and tablets using a designated app, which costs $30 to $100.

A less expensive option is to use the Montana State Library's Cadastral, an online land ownership map available at svc.mt.gov/msl/mtcadastral. Hunters can print the site's maps and use them with low-cost built-in GPS base maps or a smartphone app, such as the GPS Topo USA, to avoid inadvertently trespassing even in areas with no cell phone coverage.

Also helping hunters find public lands are people like Dwayne Andrews, a retired FWP employee in Miles City. For more than a decade, Andrews and several colleagues at state and federal land management agencies have installed thousands of small signs indicating legal entry and exit points to hundreds of thousands of acres of state and federal parcels across eastern and southern Montana. "It's all public land, but until we got those markers up most people didn't even know it was there," says Andrews.

Hunters can reach these and other public parcels via public roads, rights-of-way, access easements, streams and rivers, or adjacent

HUNT HERE Another way to open up public land is to identify it as such. Many state school trust and BLM tracts in eastern Montana lack boundary signs, which people like retired FWP employee Dwayne Andrews have been installing over the past decade.

public lands. Some have even resorted to hiring helicopter services to drop them into remote or isolated areas and pick them up later. Though legal and cheaper than some private-land trespass fees, renting a chopper is hardly feasible for most hunters. An easier way to reach many stranded lands is to obtain permission from an adjacent landowner.

That's an approach highly recommended by Alan Charles, FWP landowner/sportsman relations coordinator. As manager of Montana's Block Management Program, Charles has spent 18 years helping hunters gain and maintain access to public and private lands. As an avid big game and bird hunter himself, he is always on the lookout for unmarked or isolated public parcels. Charles says that every time he plans an outing, he searches for remote public lands surrounded by private property. When he spots an interesting one, he approaches the surrounding landowners with a smile and a handshake.

"Some of my best hunting experiences have been on places that glowed orange with 'No Trespassing' signs," Charles says. "We still have many landowners in Montana who appreciate that hunters need a place to go. Many may be traditional ranchers and farmers who know that not everyone is as blessed with land as they are. So even if they might not want you hunting on their own property, many will say, 'Sure, you can go up and access that public land—you bet.'"

HERE'S WHERE I AM New GPS and smartphone apps loaded with land ownership maps make it easy for hunters and others to know their exact location relative to private property. The apps display property boundaries, landowner names, hunting districts, Block Management Areas, and more. Right: Hunters are quickly figuring out how to access isolated public lands in Montana and reach deer and elk that previously had been considered beyond reach.

THE STATE HELPS OUT

Recognizing that some people might need incentives to get to "You bet," the 2013 Montana Legislature created the Unlocking State Lands Program, which gives landowners an annual $500 tax credit for allowing public access to isolated state parcels. Qualifying large-acreage owners holding multiple state sections within their borders can write off as much as $2,000 in taxes per year.

Access through the new program is walk-in only but requires no reservations or special fees. It's also not limited to hunting, says Ken McDonald, head of the FWP Wildlife Division. State parcels made accessible may also hold fishing, bird watching, and other recreational opportunities. "One of the many things we like about the program is that it's paid for with state general fund dollars rather than hunting and fishing licenses revenue, typically the case with so much of public access, even when it benefits other recreational users," McDonald says.

Working with willing landowners, FWP has also acquired or is in the process of securing several right-of-way easements across parcels of private land to public hold-

Montana the top western state in off-limits public land acreage

Recent analysis by the Colorado-based Center for Western Priorities shows that more than 4 million acres of public land in the West is inaccessible to the public. Topping the list is Montana, with nearly 1.96 million acres, followed by Wyoming (758,000 acres) and Colorado (541,000 acres).

In many areas, a quilt of public and private ownership results in state and federal tracts stranded within private holdings. In some cases, public roads that run through private land to public property are closed off, fenced, or illegally marked "Private."

Montana Senator Jon Tester is one of several members of Congress who have introduced bills, so far with no success, that would direct land managers to identify public property without public access and allocate funds to create permanent entry.

To read a copy of the report, "Landlocked: Measuring Public Land Access in the West," visit westernpriorities.org.

Public land in Montana inaccessible because the public can't cross corners ..... **724,000 acres**

Fully land-locked by private lands ..... **1,231,000 acres**

Total amount inaccessible and off-limits ..... **1,955,000 acres**

ings. "Some of these 'blockages' are only a quarter-mile to a half-mile wide," says McDonald. "We're working on one right now that will secure access to 40,000 acres of national forest." Funding the easements are license sales from the Come Home to Hunt Program, created by the 2009 Montana Legislature to give previous Montana residents now living out of state the opportunity to secure a deer or elk license.

Another route to public lands that should not be overlooked is through Montana's existing private-land access arrangements. Chinook rancher Richard Stuker allows access to isolated BLM parcels within land he has enrolled in FWP's Block Management Program. "I'm the second generation of my family to own this property," says Stuker, also a member of the Fish and Wildlife Commission. "My dad always allowed hunting and, as long as people obey the rules, I don't mind them out there."

Stuker says that whenever access involves private land, hunters need to employ their best etiquette in order to protect the privilege. As long as landowners feel respected, he says, hunters will be surprised at what gates open up, even—and perhaps especially—in situations like corner crossings.

> "Hunters may not realize that many parcels cut off by private property might be accessible to them right now."

THE CORNER CROSSING DEBATE

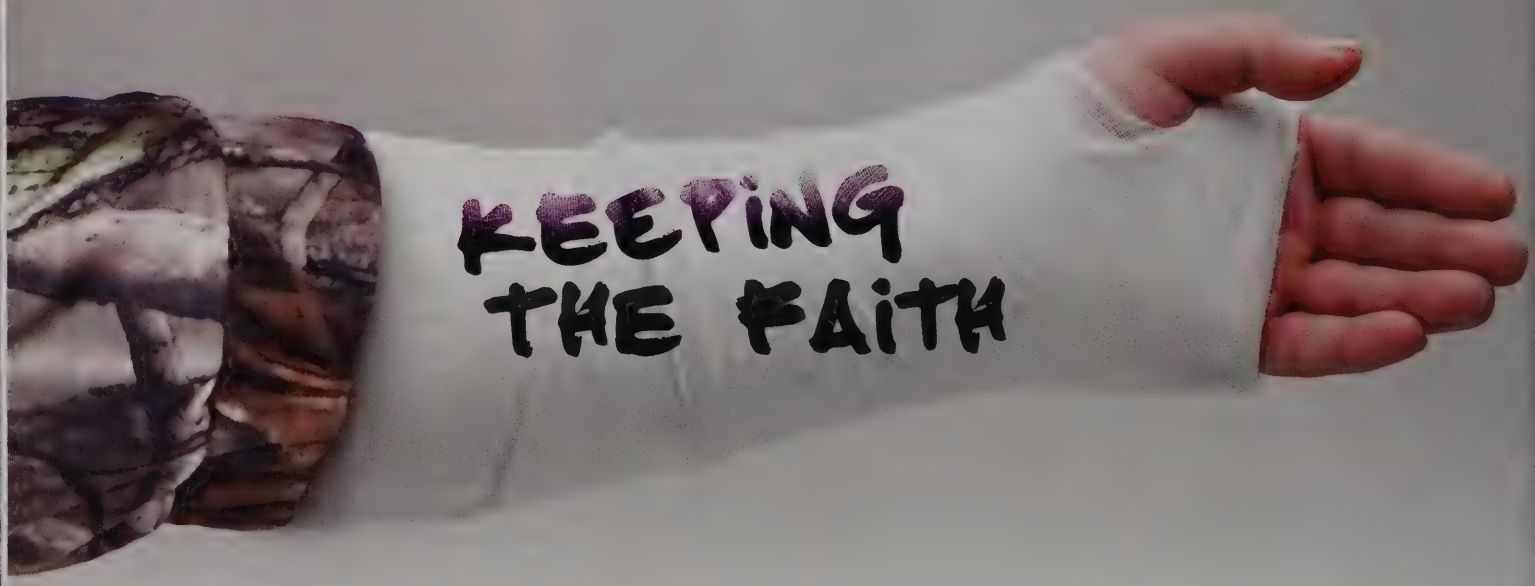
Corner crossings are a thorny issue, pitting the public's rights to access public land against landowners' rights over who sets foot on their property. The issue comes up where blocks of public land are intermixed, checkerboard fashion, with blocks of private land. The public parcels often touch each other at the corners, and hunters have long argued that, by literally jumping from one corner to another, they remain on public property and aren't trespassing on adjacent private holdings. The courts have yet to rule on the matter, but both FWP and the DNRC maintain that corner crossing constitutes trespassing.

A bill introduced in the 2013 legislative session would have made corner crossing legal, but it failed in committee. Stuker says such legislation may be unnecessary because many landowners are open to allowing corner crossings if asked. "If you can catch a landowner and say 'Hey, I know this is your property, do you mind if I cross?" it's really not a big issue if you cross right in the corner," he says.

John Gibson, president of the Public Land/Water Access Association (PL/WAA), is less convinced. He says his group regularly goes to court over access issues such as corner crossings, which often puts him at odds with some large landowners looking to restrict entry to public parcels abutting their property. The group is also fighting to maintain the legal status of hundreds of public roads in Montana that cross private land en route to key public ground. What exactly constitutes a public road can be a gray area in state law, says McDonald, adding that "FWP is working with legislators and the PL/WAA and other groups to keep public roads public to maintain public land access."

As for opening up more isolated tracts, FWP's Private Land/Public Wildlife Council—composed of legislators, sportsmen, and landowners—is currently working to enhance the Come Home to Hunt Program so it can fund additional access across private land. That won't completely solve the problem, says Charles, who acts as FWP's liaison with the council. But, like the Unlocking State Lands Program, it would provide additional financial incentives for landowners who allow hunters and others to cross their holdings. "It's a huge challenge trying to balance private property rights with the concept of public wildlife that belongs to everybody," Charles says. "But we've found that there are ways, like with Block Management and other FWP programs, to increase public access to wildlife."

In many cases, hunters already hold the keys to isolated public land in their hand. "They may not realize that many parcels cut off by private property might be accessible to them right now," Charles adds. "Pore over maps. Drive around and investigate. And then consider making that long walk up to the front porch and ringing the doorbell."



KEEPING THE FAITH

Knowing he'd been lucky beyond measure to draw two coveted tags in one year, he wasn't going to let a little bad luck get in the way of filling them both. By Todd Wilkinson

Pastor Steve Sturgeon is known for delivering colorful, inspiring sermons to his parishioners at Dillon Baptist Church in southwestern Montana. Over a span of three decades, he has often regaled his congregation with stories about believers who confronted adversity and kept the faith.

Late in 2013, after Montana's big game hunting season ended, Sturgeon shared a riveting homily that left listeners rapt in the pews. The harrowing tale, based on real-life events, happened to involve the minister-sportsman himself.

The story began the previous summer, when Sturgeon received a letter from Fish, Wildlife & Parks. "I thought, 'Hmmm, this envelope doesn't look like the kind they typically send saying you didn't get the big game tags you put in for,'" says Sturgeon. "I opened it up and discovered I had drawn a goat permit. Good grief—I couldn't believe it! What an exciting bit of news after 31 years of trying to get a goat tag. Sometimes, you just have to have faith."

Understandably joyous, Sturgeon continued flipping through his stack of mail and found another envelope from FWP, similar to the first. "I couldn't believe it. This one informed me I had received a permit to harvest a bighorn sheep!" he says.

Sturgeon's excitement, however, eventually turned to suspicion: "I thought, wait a minute, is somebody trying to be funny and playing a prank on me, knowing how much I love to hunt?"

It was no joke: Against astronomically long odds, the pastor had drawn both a Montana mountain goat tag and bighorn sheep tag in the same year.

Figuring he couldn't do both hunts justice if he tried to fill the two tags the same season, he called FWP in Helena and asked if he could use one tag that year and the other in 2014. No dice. "They told me I could give one tag back, but then I'd have to reapply for it again like everyone else in the years ahead," he says. "They made it clear there are no guarantees that I'd ever draw one of those tags again in this lifetime."

Sturgeon, 58, opted to keep both tags. Together with his friend Ken Hunt, he set out to scout the backcountry and anticipate where goats and sheep would likely be in the fall. He also consulted with FWP biologists Craig Fager and Gary Hammond to learn more about goat and sheep behavior.

In October, Sturgeon decided to pursue a goat first, knowing that deep snows could soon pile up and curtail access to the high-country animals. A few months earlier, he and his buddy had scouted Hogback Mountain in the Snowcrest Range, where they'd spotted several billies. Sturgeon knew that the only way to get close to the animals was to hire a guide and horses. He and his guide drove to a trailhead and rode 5 miles to a base camp, where they slept in tents. That first night, half a foot of snow fell.

Riding 10 miles on each of the first few days, Sturgeon and his guide didn't see a single goat. "We arrived thinking it would be easy," Sturgeon says. "But the goats I'd seen at the end of summer had moved." So the pair ventured deeper into the rocky crags until, finally, they were perched on a ridge line dividing two local landmarks called Little Devil's Hole and Big Devil's Hole.

"The snow-covered mountain was so steep and treacherous that we had to park the horses there and hoof it ourselves," Sturgeon says. After hours of scrambling across the rocky terrain and glassing, they finally spied a billy—a big one. The massive goat disappeared momentarily and emerged on the edge of a precipice near the timber line above the abyss of Big Devil's Hole. Stur-

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PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUKE DURAN/*MONTANA OUTDOORS*; PHOTOS PROVIDED BY STEVE STURGEON

geon estimated it was only 70 yards away.

The pastor fired twice, hitting the goat each time. The billy tumbled down the mountain toward the shadowy depths of Big Devil's Hole. It finally hung up—though just barely—on a scraggly juniper.

The hunter and guide slid on their bellies, feet first, down the steep scree slope to reach the goat. They were stunned by its size. The animal, which a biologist later estimated to be about seven and a half years old, had one horn protruding 9.75 inches and the other 9.5 inches, easily qualifying for the Boone and Crockett Club record books.

With daylight fast disappearing, the pair quickly field dressed the goat, intending to return the following morning to pack it out. The guide hightailed it ahead to fetch the horses, while Sturgeon took his time traversing the treacherous terrain.

With one errant step, Sturgeon slipped on a patch of ice and fell. Tumbling toward a jumble of jagged scree below, he extended his arms to cushion the blow. Upon impact, he heard a loud crack. The elbow on his left arm had broken—backwards.

"I looked down and my arm wasn't working. It was just kind of dangling there. As I looked around in pitch-black darkness, I had the sensation of being in a dream, asking myself, 'Lord, what am I doing here?'"

It's a question, he says today with a laugh, that the subjects in his Sunday sermons often ask themselves.

> "I told the doctor that, fortunately, it was my left arm that was injured because I shoot with my right."

With no other option, Sturgeon kept descending for 2 miles in the darkness. Back at camp, all he could find was aspirin to keep the pain at bay. He spent a long and uncomfortable night trying to sleep in the tent. At sunup the guide headed out to retrieve the goat, then he and Sturgeon rode 5 miles back to the trailhead, the pastor's broken elbow jarring each time his horse took a step.

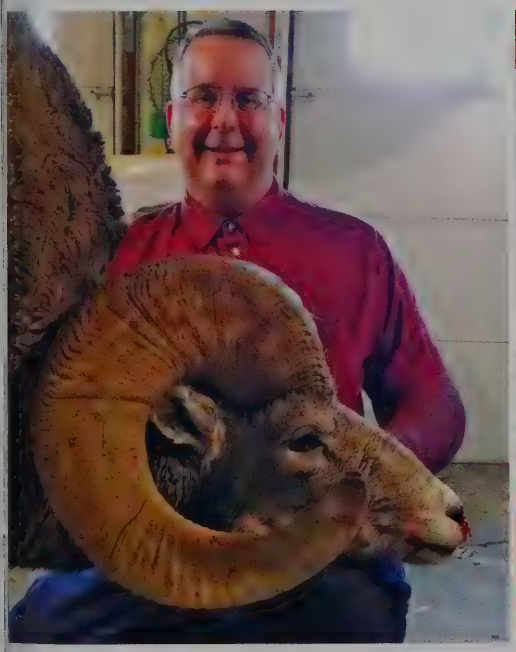
Doctors in Dillon confirmed that Sturgeon's arm was badly broken and referred him to an orthopedic specialist in Missoula. In the operating room, the surgeon inserted two screws to put the joint back together. Then he wrapped Sturgeon's limb in a cast extending from armpit to wrist.

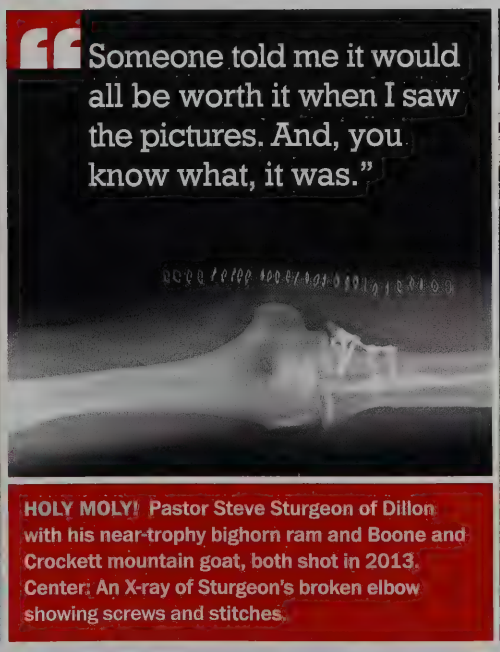
When the physician told him he needed to take it easy, Sturgeon said that wouldn't be possible because he still had a sheep tag to fill. "I can sometimes be kind of stubborn," he says. "I told the doctor that, fortunately, it was my left arm that was injured because I shoot with my right."

For another ten days, Sturgeon continued his quest for a sheep, often driving along bumpy backcountry roads with his cast-covered arm encased in pillows. Finally, the quarry cooperated. With his daughter, Rachel, and his friend Ken with him, Sturgeon hunted Muddy Creek in the Tendoy Mountains. The group quickly found several rams. Sturgeon crept to within 200 yards and dropped a big one with his 7mm Remington mag firing a 150-grain bullet, the same load he used to kill his goat.

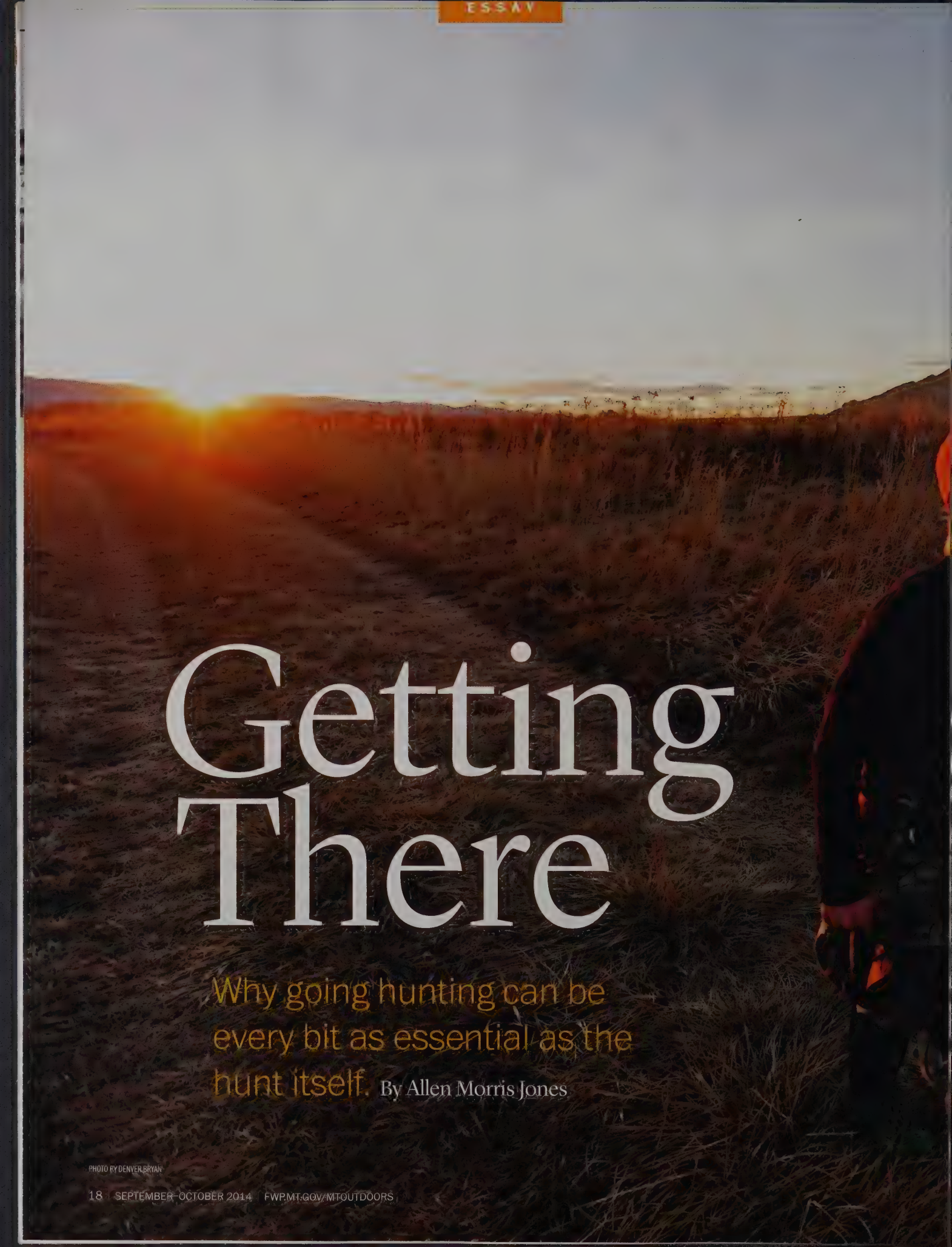
The sheep's horn measured 15 inches around the base and 40 inches from base to tip—just shy of a Boone and Crockett record. "Both animals are huge," Sturgeon says, noting that he had the heads mounted and shared the meat with his parishioners.

Unfortunately, the arm pain refused to go away. So Sturgeon returned to the hospital where doctors discovered that the joint was not healing. A surgeon put in four additional screws as well as a titanium plate. "Someone at the time told me it would all be worth it when I saw the pictures. And, you know what, it was," says the pastor. "I'm one of the happiest hunters in Montana."





HOLY MOLY! Pastor Steve Sturgeon of Dillon with his near-trophy bighorn ram and Boone and Crockett mountain goat, both shot in 2013. Center: An X-ray of Sturgeon's broken elbow showing screws and stitches.



Getting There

Why going hunting can be every bit as essential as the hunt itself.

By Allen Morris Jones

PHOTO BY DENVER BRYAN

Much of what's most important about hunting comes in the quiet moments, the days and hours that precede the trigger pull. Early morning headlights cutting through grainy gray light. The abrupt, jostling transition from blacktop to gravel. The soft click of car doors pressed gently closed and the whisper of a rifle sliding out of its case. A wooden gatepost under your hand and a bloom of blue breath as you stare up toward the mountains. Beside you, if you're the luckiest person in the world, a father, a daughter, a brother, a good friend. Here's something to think about: *Going* hunting can be every bit as essential as the hunt itself.

Driving away from the cracked concrete and vapor lights of town, you are, in some measure, leaving your life behind. The anxiety of dwindling bank accounts and rising credit card debt gives way to shifting breezes and fresh tracking snow, pine forests, and the mysterious clattering of a nearby rock slide. Hunting is about optimism, about convincing yourself that the next ridge will be the *one*, the ridge to show you the buck or bull of your life. To imagine it is to briefly possess it. And so to make the trip, to even step out the door and take the first few steps away from the mundane...it already feels like a bit of magic. Am I making any sort of sense? Perhaps.

Maybe it starts in childhood. When I was 12 or 13 years old in Livingston, we pointed our early morning drives toward Tom Miner Basin or the Castle Mountains, sometimes Rock Creek in the Crazies. We'd glass for spring bears and later, in September, listen for bugling bulls. In November, we'd take long hikes after bruiser mule deer bucks. It would always take at least an hour to get to where we were going, usually starting at five o'clock in the morning. Wedged

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: MAT ROWLEY; DUŠAN SMETANA; STEVE OEHLENSCHLAGER

Beside you, if you're the luckiest person in the world, ***a father, a daughter, a brother, a good friend.***

On either side of you, co-conspirators, collaborators. Buddies. ***There's an aspect of the tribal about it.***

between my father and older brother, Mark, in the bench seat of a 1970s-era Dodge, I huddled up to the heater vents and tried to keep from nodding off. When you're that age and in the middle of your first hunting season, each day is precious. I didn't want to miss a minute. Dad and Mark talked easily, rehashing old hunts, passing along brief asides that I rightly picked up as cautionary tales. "Anyway, turns out he still had the safety on." A snort of sympathetic laughter. Later, the first tentative plans for the day's hunt. "I'll drop you and Allen off at the bridge then drive a few miles farther up. We'll work our way down toward each other, maybe push something out of its bed." Five o'clock in the morning, just outside Lennup, I remember a bobcat leaping liquidly across the road. "Did you see that?" Memory compresses things. Snow swirled in the headlights and a cow elk jerked her head at our passing. Magic, and a bit of the sacred as well. There's something holy about the transition, moving from the predictably mundane toward possibility. All it takes is a truck and a big game license. Maybe a bag of homemade jerky.

Growing older, aging into a life spent hunting, it turns out that friendships are built into this same space, the blank minutes, the pauses. Shared experiences and common goals. "Remember when you got that buck fever so bad you shucked out half your shells?" Respect hidden under derision

Allen Morris Jones is a novelist, essayist, and author of A Quiet Place of Violence: Hunting and Ethics in the Missouri Breaks. *He lives in Livingston.*

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: DENVER BRYAN; DONALD M. JONES; DUŠAN SMETANA

Hunting together, you come to know one another ***in a way that's largely unavailable to the rest of the world.***

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DENVER BRYAN; DONALD M. JONES; BETHANN CARPANINI MERKLE

and the warmth of a quick, half-embarrassed shoulder squeeze. "Helluva shot." On either side of you, co-conspirators, collaborators. Buddies. There's an aspect of the tribal about it. Huddled around a hat-sized campfire, it's us against the world. Hunting together, you come to know one another in a way that's largely unavailable to the rest of the world. Putting it into words threatens to cheapen it. Fifteen years ago, my brother stood at the window of his house outside of Missoula, looking out at the yard. I saw him tense very, very slightly. He was suddenly... intent. We've hunted together every year since I was 12. I said, "What do you see?"

"Fox. Little red fox. Just ran through the yard, into those bushes."

Hunting is about essentials. Life and death. Predator and prey. Fathers and mothers and sons and daughters. My four-year-old boy, before he could put a sentence together, could whistle out a pretty good elk bugle. Now he's already talking about our first hunting trip. "When I get my first bow, I'll use it to go bowhunting with you. Right, Daddy? Right?" Indeed. Bows and little boys, reaching out to find a target, impact the world. As he grows up, I'll teach him the essentials first. Treat every gun like it's loaded. Only take the shots you're sure about. We eat what we kill. But I also want to pass along those things that are more easily shown than discussed. How to sit and listen, just *listen*. How hunting is about more than simply killing; it's about finding an aspect of nature inside yourself. Shifting breezes and a fresh snow, a clattering of shale. Optimism. Our modern world is riddled through with irony, sarcasm, insecurity. I want to show him the opposite of all that. It's one of the surprises of fatherhood, how much I'm looking forward to showing him the virtues of hunting. Exertion, ambition, silence. And afterwards, if we've done it right, I'll try to show him how to bring these most essential aspects of the hunt home with us. Respect, patience, awe. Here, son, here's how the world works.

Going hunting with my boy? I can hardly wait.

Congress Gives Wildlife a Boost

Conservation leaders say the final 2014 Farm Bill does much for Montana's pheasants, ducks, deer, songbirds, and other grassland wildlife. By Todd Wilkinson

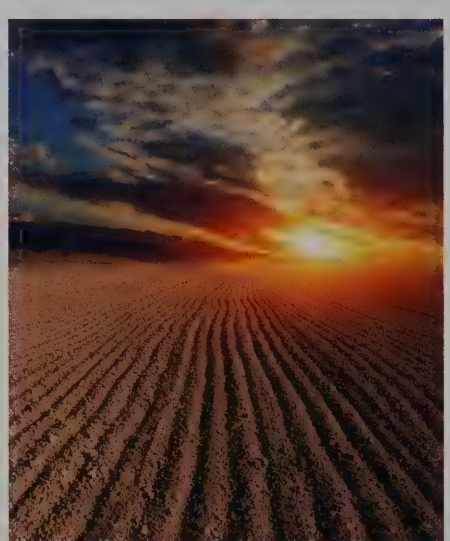
Few pieces of federal legislation are more important and farther reaching for hunters, anglers, and wildlife watchers than the Farm Bill. The 2014 version, passed by Congress and signed into law this past February, is no exception. Though conservation experts say the bill, which authorizes $956 billion in spending over the next decade, came up short in some respects, it still contains many important wildlife-friendly provisions that prevent topsoil erosion and conserve clean water, wetlands, native grasslands, forests, and other wildlife habitat. "It is definitely a bill to cheer about," says Steve Kline, director of government relations with the Washington, D.C.–based Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, which has strong involvement in Montana.

Catherine Wightman, FWP's Habitat Program and Farm Bill coordinator, says many wildlife conservation leaders worked to ensure that the Farm Bill provided economic support for farmers and ranchers while also supporting stewardship of important wildlife habitat. "The final bill did a good job of striking that balance," she says. "We didn't get everything we wanted, but on the other hand there were a few bonuses in there we hadn't counted on."

CROP INSURANCE AND SOD SAVER

For years, conservation leaders have pushed to create provisions in the Farm Bill that reward landowners for being good land stewards. To that end, a new regulation requires that landowners who wish to qualify for federal crop insurance meet conservation objectives. The notion of tethering conservation to crop insurance isn't new, but it hasn't been part of Farm Bill mandates since 1996.

"Depending on how you look at it, it's either a reward for sound stewardship or a financial disincentive to those who might be making hasty decisions that could negatively impact wildlife habitat," says Dan Bailey, Montana regional director of Pheasants Forever. "If you are going to drain a wetland, or plow up virgin sod, or farm on highly erodible land, then the decision comes with greater risk. Now you'll no longer be eligible for federal crop insurance, which could be an important factor for many farmers."



CORN VS. CRITTERS Conservation leaders say the federal mandate for ethanol in gasoline has been a disaster for grassland wildlife. Corn prices rose so high that to many landowners it made economic sense to plow up CRP grasslands and plant them to crops.

A parallel component of the new Farm Bill, known as Sod Saver, provides similar economic disincentives to landowners considering busting native prairie and sagebrush into new cropland or pasture. Montana is one of six states—including the Dakotas, Nebraska, Minnesota, and Iowa—in the Sod Saver program. "We're hopeful these programs can help slow or reverse wildlife habitat loss," Bailey says.

CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM

Since 1986, the biggest Farm Bill program affecting wildlife has been the U.S. Department of Agriculture Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The program pays farmers to take highly erodible cropland out of production and plant it to native grasses. Most

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SHUTTERSTOCK; LINDA S. MARTIN; SHUTTERSTOCK

FRIENDLY TO WILDLIFE One major conservation measure of the 2014 Farm Bill is a requirement that landowners who wish to qualify for federal crop insurance meet certain conservation objectives—for example, not tilling virgin prairie or draining marshes or wet meadows, such as those on this western Montana ranch.

famously, CRP has been a boon to pheasants. According to USDA statistics, a 4 percent increase in CRP grassland acres is associated with a 22 percent increase in pheasant counts.

The popular program's vast grassland acreage also benefits sharptails, Hungarian partridge, sage-grouse, waterfowl, shorebirds, and prairie songbirds. Big game, too. "How many times have you been on the prairie and had a big whitetail buck jump up out of the grass in front of you or spooked a band of pronghorn?" says Bailey.

Unfortunately, recent high grain prices—fueled largely by a federal mandate on ethanol production—have convinced many landowners to plow up their CRP grasslands and plant them to corn or wheat. Across Montana, CRP acreage has declined by 42 percent with a loss of 1.48 million acres. In the pheasant- and whitetail-rich region along the Hi-Line, CRP acres have dropped more than 55 percent since 2006, a loss of more than 800,000 acres.

The previous Farm Bill, passed in 2008, set a cap of 32 million acres enrolled in CRP, a target unmet because market forces made putting land into commodity crops too attractive. The 2014 Farm Bill lowers the CRP cap to 24 million acres, actually drawing down the amount from its current level of around 27 million acres, which itself represents a 25-year low. The only bright spot, says Kline, is that now the USDA is required to continually examine its CRP payments to make them more competitive with crop revenue. "CRP payments can never compete one on one with what a farmer will get renting his land for corn production, but at least it can be more competitive," he says. What's more, says Kline, conservation groups meet regularly with USDA officials, urging them to reject low-wildlife-value acreage and accept only higher-quality wildlife habitat for CRP enrollment.

RCPP

A brand new component of the 2014 Farm Bill that will attract large amounts of new private and federal funding to conservation is the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). The program will competitively award federal funds to conservation projects designed by local partners specifically for their region. Eligible partners include private companies, universities, nonprofit organizations, local, state, and tribal governments, and others. They will join with agricultural and conservation organizations and producers to invest money, manpower, and materials in conservation projects, says Erik Suffridge, assistant state conservationist for programs at the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Bozeman.

The USDA will spend $400 million in the first year of the program and require part-

Todd Wilkinson of Bozeman is a conservation journalist and author of Last Stand: Ted Turner's Quest to Save a Troubled Planet.

TOO THICK The Farm Bill allocated millions of dollars to thin Montana forests to reduce disease and pest insect outbreaks. Thinning will also open areas to sunlight to produce more grasses and shrubs that elk, moose, and deer eat.

ners to provide an equal match in funding, labor, or other contributions. The total five-year USDA contribution nationwide will be $1.2 billion, awarded through grants.

Priority for the new conservation dollars, says Suffridge, will go to projects that have multiple partners, including those at a state or regional level. "The RCPP empowers local decision making," he says. "It brings together conservation groups, landowners, cities and townships, universities, agricultural associations, and others to design conservation projects tailored to our needs here in Montana."

According to Kline, the TRCP government relations director, creation of the RCPP in Washington's contentious political climate shows strong support for private lands conservation across the political spectrum. "People know that conservation is important, even if they live in a city and don't hunt or fish," he says. "A lot of people in downstream states understand that the water running through their rivers or reaching them at the drinking fountain started its course passing through rural farmland and ranchland."

OTHER WILDLIFE PROGRAMS

▸ *Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program:* Congress authorized $40 million nationally to pay eligible landowners to provide public hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching access—similar to Montana's Block Management Program. Priority is given to property near public wildlife lands and those that benefit from conservation practices such as fencing cattle away from streams.

▸ *Agricultural Conservation Easement Program:* The new Farm Bill also allocates another $1 billion to landowners nationwide who implement conservation easements that protect wetlands, grasslands, and productive farmland from conversion to other uses, such as subdivisions.

▸ *Forest Thinning:* U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced earlier this year that millions of dollars in the Farm Bill could be made available in Montana for forest treatment and thinning projects identified by Governor Steve Bullock. According to U.S. Forest Service biologists, more than 7.6 million acres of national forest in Montana are vulnerable to outbreaks of disease and pest insects. Thinning will fortify remaining trees to help them ward off threats while also producing habitat better suited to big game animals. "Logging projects that open areas to sunlight produce more forage that elk need to put on weight in summer," says Eric Tomasik, regional wildlife program leader for the U.S. Forest Service Northern Region.

▸ *Environmental Quality Incentives Program:* EQIP provides money and manpower—especially for farmers and ranchers who might not be able to afford it—to carry out conservation practices.

▸ *Sage-Grouse Initiative:* This NRCS program, begun in 2010, was created in large part to help ranchers graze cattle in ways that benefit sagebrush grasslands. In Montana, 64 percent of sage-grouse habitat sits on private lands, so the timing and intensity of grazing affects the birds' survival.

"The big issue for sage-grouse in eastern Montana is landowners giving up on cattle because it's no longer profitable," says David Naugle, a wildlife professor at the University of Montana and science adviser for the SGI. "That means they sell or convert their land to crops with no value to sage-grouse. The SGI helps set up grazing regimes that are good both for sage-grouse habitat and ranchers' bottom lines."

The issue is especially timely, given that western states are drafting individual conservation plans for sage-grouse. In 2015, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is expected to announce whether it will list the bird under the federal Endangered Species Act. Part of the determination will rest on arguments made by Montana and other western states that sufficient habitat safeguards are in place, such as those provided by the SGI.

LEFT TO RIGHT: SHUTTERSTOCK; CHUCK ROBBINS

A HUNTER'S HEAVY HEART OVER SAGE-GROUSE

By Andrew McKean

Over the last decade, as the rest of the West has been wringing its calloused hands over plummeting sage-grouse populations, I've been quietly, happily, and productively hunting the big open-country birds in what has seemed like my personal paradise.

For at least a dozen years, I've religiously greeted September 1, the traditional grouse opener, with a shotgun and an eager dog on the shimmering sagebrush sea outside my home in northeastern Montana. My twin boys' first hunt a couple of years ago was for sage-grouse, which locals call "bombers" for their surprising heft and ponderous flight.

For most of those years, I never saw another hunter, and I was back at my pickup well before noon, a limit of bombers cooling in my vest, picking cactus thorns out of my dog's paws on the dusty tailgate. I might return to the prairie once or twice more in a season, but I never killed more than a handful of grouse, though I would routinely flush several coveys in a hard day of hunting.

To me, the appeal of hunting bombers has never been about possessing them. It's been the challenge of locating the birds in millions of acres of unbroken sagebrush—nearly all of it public—of finding buffalo skulls in scoured banks of prairie streams, and of seeing antelope sail the horizon like black-faced schooners. It's been about engaging a native species that evolved with this remarkable landscape. And it's been about the purity of solitude, of purposefully walking alone under the spreading sky.

As I've tuned in to the wider, anxious conversation about sage-grouse across the West, I've become increasingly aware that my own experience with the birds is unusual. Across much of their range, especially in the arid Great Basin of Nevada, Utah, southern Idaho, and eastern Oregon, grouse numbers have plummeted over the last 25 years. Drought, wildfire, overgrazing, cheatgrass incursions, disease, and energy development are all cited as reasons for the decline. One by one, states around me have either restricted or ended hunting.

Habitat fragmentation is usually given as the main reason that bombers go away. But besides a few power lines, fences, and cows where I hunt, I can't imagine that the habitat has changed much since the Indians whose tepee rings I find lived here.

But a few years ago, I noticed that I had to walk a lot farther to find birds, and the coveys I put up seemed smaller in number, with more adults than juveniles. Then, two years ago, friends came to visit me with the express purpose of hunting bombers. In two days of hard hunting, we didn't see a single bird.

On September 1 last year, I shot a limit of doves out on the prairie, but I didn't flush a sage-grouse. My boys have never shot a bomber on the wing, though they've walked miles of prime habitat and have picked cactus thorns from their own paws.

This past July, Montana's Fish and Wildlife Commission voted to close Montana's sage-grouse hunting season on more than half the bird's range and shorten the season to just 30 days, citing documented, long-term declines of male grouse on springtime dancing grounds. To me, it's a saddening proposition, to so drastically curtail hunting for a species that, only a generation ago, was the most popular game bird in the state.

But then I recall my own experiences. I didn't want to say anything a couple of years ago, after my first unsuccessful opening-day hunt, because I wanted to keep alive the myth of abundance here in Montana's most intact grouse habitat. But something is wrong. The birds are declining. We need to figure it out and stop the slide.

Will suspending hunting help anyone figure out what's wrong? I don't know, but I do know that sage-grouse have far bigger problems than harvest by a few hunters. The biggest is landowners plowing up sagebrush prairie and planting it to more profitable crops. And I worry that once a hunting season for the bird closes, it's unlikely to reopen, and sage-grouse will lose one of their most passionate champions: the few of us who buy hunting licenses and trudge the prairie in search of them.

It breaks my heart to say this, but I would grudgingly trade a few years of hunting sage-grouse so that my children, and their children, might have the opportunity that I've had.

But now that FWP has partially closed the season, they owe those of us who are so fond of bombers some real work to figure out what's wrong.

Andrew McKean is editor of Outdoor Life. *He lives in Glasgow.*

Getting the Green Light

A rancher's tips for gaining access to private land this season

By Dan Anderson

It's no secret that much private land in Montana is off-limits to public hunting. Some landowners reserve their property for friends or family, others lease it to outfitters, and some restrict access to maintain privacy or simply to avoid the hassle of strangers on their land.

As a result, too often hunters give up trying to hunt any private land not enrolled in the Fish, Wildlife & Parks Block Management Program. They should reconsider. Many farms and ranches, even those with "No Trespassing" signs or orange gate posts, may not be entirely closed. The key to gaining access is knowing exactly how—and when—to ask permission. Yet many hunters who knock on my door kill their chances before the first words spill out of their mouth.

For 50 years I've been fielding requests for permission to hunt our acreage. Sometimes I grant permission and sometimes I don't. Often the reason is obvious. A big SUV pulled into our driveway last year, loaded with half a dozen hunters wearing blaze orange. A guy in the backseat rolled down his window and addressed my wife, Emily, who was doing her barn chores, with, "Hey, honey!"

I'll leave her response to your imagination.

Thankfully, we've had far more pleasant experiences—many of them resulting in us granting permission. Having fielded hundreds of requests over the years, I've assembled a list of permission-asking dos and don'ts that apply to our property and, I suspect, would produce similar results on other ranchlands across Montana.

DO:

- Ask early, preferably weeks or even months before hunting season. If you are reading this in September, now is the time to get permission for the deer and elk firearms season, not in November.
- Make your request in person if possible, rather than by telephone, unless you already know the rancher. The phone puts the landowner on the spot, and under pressure the answer will likely be "No." Asking by email or in a letter is second best.
- Visit the ranch in nonhunting garb.
- Be polite and friendly, but it's okay to be a tad persistent. If the rancher doesn't give you an emphatic "No!" there may be hope.
- Know who owns the land you want to hunt and where the boundaries end. Years ago that involved a trip to the county courthouse, but these days software available for your GPS or smartphone makes it much easier. You'll embarrass yourself by asking a rancher for permission to hunt on land that's not his or hers.
- Show interest in the rancher's operation, but don't feign knowledge you don't have.
- Detail exactly who will be hunting. You alone (and stick to this) is best. You and one other is often okay. But you and more than one? No.
- Hunting with traditional tools (longbow, lever-action rifle, or single-shot rifle) can be a plus in some ranchers' eyes and may be worth mentioning.
- Offering to help with ranch work can be useful, but remember that much of it involves running complex machinery you probably don't know how to operate. Fencing is one area where ranchers need labor and often welcome help.
- Find common ground with ranchers and farmers. Social interaction through a club, organization, or church is a plus.

DON'T:

- Don't cruise roads during hunting season, spot game, then ask at the nearest ranch or farm house for permission to hunt. A dozen other hunters have probably seen the same buck and have already pestered the landowner. You should have done your scouting and asking weeks before.
- Any evidence of alcohol consumption—odor, behavior, beer cans on the dash—is cause for immediate refusal.
- Avoid asking on Sundays, particularly in the morning.
- Don't show up with mud-splattered trucks or ATVs. To ranchers and farmers, that mud likely means you've been off-road making ruts—the last thing they want on their property. If your hunting vehicle is a monster truck with oversized tires, festooned with in-your-face decals and carrying a muddy four-wheeler in the bed, you might want to borrow your spouse's car for asking permission.

Dan Anderson and his wife, Emily, own a ranch in south-central Montana.

- Don't act as if you're doing the rancher a favor by offering to "thin out" the game animals on his or her place. Yes, whitetails consume a good share of my alfalfa, but I still like and admire the animals. I didn't respond well to the man who called them "white worms" and offered to fix my "problem" with his pocketful of doe tags.
- Don't display firearms that may be intimidating. I've come to admire the accuracy and adaptability of the AR-15 platform (though as a Marine I considered them wretched little rifles), and I won't quarrel with those who use them for hunting. That said, it will take many years for these firearms to be completely accepted by the nonhunting public. A "black rifle" hanging in the window of your pickup may connote combat to some landowners.

IN THE FIELD:

So you've done everything right, and a rancher or farmer has opened that gate a crack. But like a new employee, you're only on probation. Whether you'll be welcomed back depends on how you treat the owner and the land. Some additional tips:

- Don't show up with additional hunters. If you've received permission, consider it a treasure, but not one you can share. If you've told the rancher you and your daughter will hunt, don't bring a buddy and his son as well. Don't even ask. A primary pet peeve among ranchers I know is the ripple effect of giving permission to people who then bring friends, who then bring their friends, and so on.
- Obey any of the rancher's bag restrictions, even those more stringent than what your license allows. If the rancher asks that you shoot cow elk only (or doe whitetails or mule deer bucks), you need to honor that request.
- Drive as little as possible. Any vehicle or ATV use must be approved in advance.
- Unless otherwise instructed, leave gates as you find them—open if open, closed if closed. You aren't doing the rancher a favor by closing a gate you find open. You may be shutting livestock away from water.
- Never litter, even so much as a gum wrapper.
- Check back with the rancher on your way out. He or she will want to know how you did, what you saw, and if you spotted anything suspicious.
- Once you get home, whether you took game or not, send the landowner a note of appreciation. If you want to give a bit more, you can never go wrong with a gift card for a local restaurant.
- Finally, when asking permission to hunt on private property, keep in mind what Emily and I say about our life on land that's been in her family since the 1890s: We don't live in our rather modest house; we live on the ranch. Every pasture, coulee, and patch of woods is another room in our house. When you ask to hunt on our ranch, you're asking to *come into our home* and seek game with a deadly weapon. Everything you can do to create trust bodes well for your chances of success, both in asking permission and, if receiving it, being welcomed again.

Like a new employee, you're only on probation. Whether you'll be welcomed back depends on how you treat the owner and the land.

THE PAYOFF Asking permission to hunt private land is a skill well worth learning. The reward can be access to game-rich land off-limits to hunters unwilling to follow simple rules of polite behavior and respectful conduct.

LEFT: PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUKE DURAN/*MONTANA OUTDOORS*; RIGHT: DENVER BRYAN

HOW FREEDOM

Where I grew up, the streets were mostly public—except for that neighborhood on the bluff overlooking the Mississippi, the one with the gate and the limestone guardhouse. But, aside from that refuge for the wealthy, you could bike down any thoroughfare without asking permission or meeting stony stares from residents.

Off the road, it was a different matter. In town, the real estate was chopped up into half-acre lots, each little fiefdom carefully tended and jealously protected from interlopers, even 12-year-old boys. Maybe especially 12-year-old boys. Farther from town, the lots and houses got bigger. They often had a scrap of timber, a stretch of creek, sometimes even a pond, all off-limits to strangers. Out in the country, the ground was given over to the intense production of crops, which must have been quite valuable, considering the care with which they had been fenced and posted. It was a landscape of boundaries.

This arrangement encouraged imagination. A kid could look over from the shoulder of the gravel road and wonder whether that pond had bluegill, whether the fringe of timber held a covey of quail or a cottontail. With the grass always greener on the other side of the fence, it was possible to believe that the cover over there was stiff with game, from squirrels to trophy whitetails. And there was never any risk of that illusion being shattered, since the chance of

THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN FRONT, NEAR DUPUYER, BY JOHN LAMBING

FEELS

By Chris Madson

an unknown kid getting access to one of those spots was slimmer than a redbone hound after coon season.

There came a time when my parents rounded up the kids and made the trek west for vacation. The trip was a revelation. Over those two weeks, we camped in a succession of national forests and Bureau of Land Management holdings where fences had no gates and the only boundary was the horizon. In all my years, I'd never had the chance to think so big, to let imagining run free and then—if I saw fit—to follow, just to see whether the world fit the dream. Often, it did.

In this, I did nothing more than follow the trails of the generations that preceded me—the waves of emigrants, the fur trappers, the French and Spanish explorers, and, before them all, the nomads following the great herds along the edge of the glaciers. A history of restlessness that spans continents and cultures, reaching back into the shadows of our beginning; the wondering inspired by the land beyond our reach and, then, the finding out.

This may be a broader metaphor that defines the human condition—I don't know. But having spent most of my adult life in the West, I'm pretty sure that, for some of us at least, it is literally true. Now and then, we need a place to stretch out, what Daniel Boone called "elbow room." People have long been drawn to the open spaces of the West, but as the press of our own numbers gathers around us, the value of landscapes without boundaries is beyond reckoning. In an increasingly crowded world, they remind us how freedom feels.

Wyoming writer Chris Madson recently retired after 30 years as editor of Wyoming Wildlife, *where this essay first appeared.*

Where Are All the Elk?

FWP researchers found them. Now they're trying to figure out how to get the animals back onto public land. By Tom Dickson

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUKE DURAN/*MONTANA OUTDOORS*

For most of the 35 seasons that Mike Harmon has been hunting elk in the Taylor Fork, a drainage of the upper Gallatin Valley near Yellowstone National Park's northwestern corner, he was confident that all five or six members of his hunting party would fill their tags. "We'd hunt hard, but eventually every one of us would get a bull," says Harmon, who lives near Three Forks.

That long string of success began to unravel in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Though the group continued to kill an occasional cow elk or spike bull, the days when everyone in the party would head home with a mature bull were long gone. "We started to go days without cutting a track," Harmon says. "It got kind of eerie."

Harmon and his hunting buddies are not alone. Each year across Montana's elk range, more hunters are reporting fewer elk on state and federal lands, especially national forests. Yet when FWP biologists conduct winter aerial counts of elk, they see as many, in most areas, than ever. In fact, populations are over "objective"—the number that biologists believe the habitat will support and landowners will tolerate—in 50 percent of elk hunting districts.

The striking disparity between what hunters see while hunting public land and the actual number of elk in their hunting district raises questions that strike at the heart of Montana big game hunting and management: Where are those elk going? And why? And is there any way to get them back?

Private Land Magnet

For several years Julie Cunningham, FWP wildlife biologist in Bozeman, had been hearing from hunters who could no longer find elk in the Taylor Fork, a nationally known hunting area that historically held 1,600 elk during fall and early winter. She set out to learn when and to where the animals were moving, and how that compared to previous decades. Cunningham and senior research biologist Ken Hamlin, now retired, compared elk locations of the Madison Range herd documented by FWP biologists from 1976 through 1986 to locations documented in 2005-06 by FWP crews and a Montana State University graduate student. During both periods, elk summered high in mountain meadows of the Madison Range (the Upper Gallatin) and stayed there through August (see maps on page 37). As is common with elk, cooler weather in fall pushed some of the animals downhill—in this case west into the Madison Valley. But in the 1970s and '80s, many elk still remained in the high timber, and when rifle season opened in late October, the animals were accessible to hunters in the Gallatin and Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forests. Those elk did not move to winter

DISAPPEARING ACT Hunters report seeing fewer elk on national forests. Yet FWP winter surveys show as many or more elk in most hunting districts than ever. In recent years researchers have been following the "missing" elk to see where they go.

range until cold weather set in, often as late as December or January.

By 2005-06, all that had changed. Cunningham and Hamlin found that by mid-October, just before the rifle opener, more than half the elk had already moved down to the Madison Valley. There they settled on a growing number of private ranches off-limits to public hunting or on national forest tracts behind the ranches, miles from public roads and access. By November—during the heart of the hunting season—almost every elk had vanished from the Upper Gallatin. "No wonder hunters in the Taylor Fork weren't seeing elk," says Cunningham. "They'd been down in the valley for weeks."

What Cunningham documented has also occurred across other western Montana national forests, says Eric Tomasik, regional wildlife program leader for the U.S. Forest Service Northern Region in Missoula. "Historically, you'd likely see elk [on national forests], at least if you were willing to hike a bit," he says. "Now in many areas you might not see any. Then you get up on a ridge and look down in the valley and glass an entire herd on private land. It's frustrating."

"It's basically a risk analysis by elk. They generally prefer to go down to private land with limited hunting access rather than stay in forests where vegetation may be more sparse and hunting pressure is greater."

And not just for hunters. "Without the tool of public hunting, we as an agency can't meet our legal responsibilities of managing Montana's elk herds in the public trust," says Ken McDonald, head of the FWP Wildlife Division. "What that means for many livestock operations is more depredation problems, and for public hunters less access to big game. It's become one of the biggest wildlife management problems in Montana."

The Main Driver

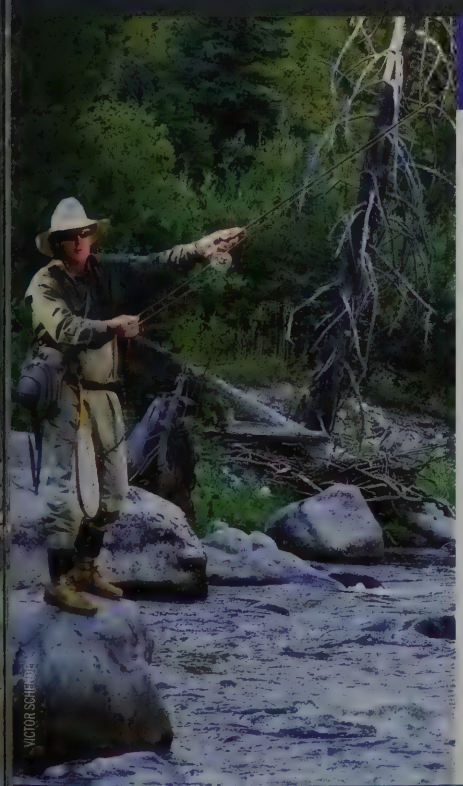
What changes over the past two decades have caused the new elk behavior? Possible reasons, say wildlife officials, are more irrigated bottomland attracting elk, greater hunting pressure on public land, wolves and other large carnivores more abundant in the mountains than the valleys, and less grass and other forage in forests due to fire suppression and logging curtailment. "But the main driver seems to be the massive change in land ownership starting in the mid-1990s," Cunningham says. "It went from working ranches that usually allowed public hunting to 'amenity' ranches owned by people who did not want public hunting. It's not surprising that elk have figured out that the best place to spend the hunting season is where hunters are not allowed."

To find out if the elk movement documented in the Madison is taking place elsewhere in Montana's elk range—and, if so, what contributes to that behavior—FWP conducted several elk movement studies. For one project, led by Bozeman-based FWP research scientist Kelly Proffitt, researchers

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

BAD MIX In addition to grazing pasture and eating haystacks, elk in some areas pose a brucellosis risk to livestock during spring calving season when the animals may mingle. Private land closed to hunting allows elk to settle into bottomlands, increasing opportunities for transmitting disease.

PHOTO BY JESSE LEE VARNADO; INFOGRAPHICS BY LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS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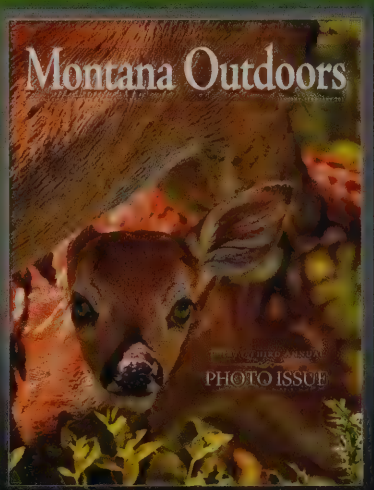

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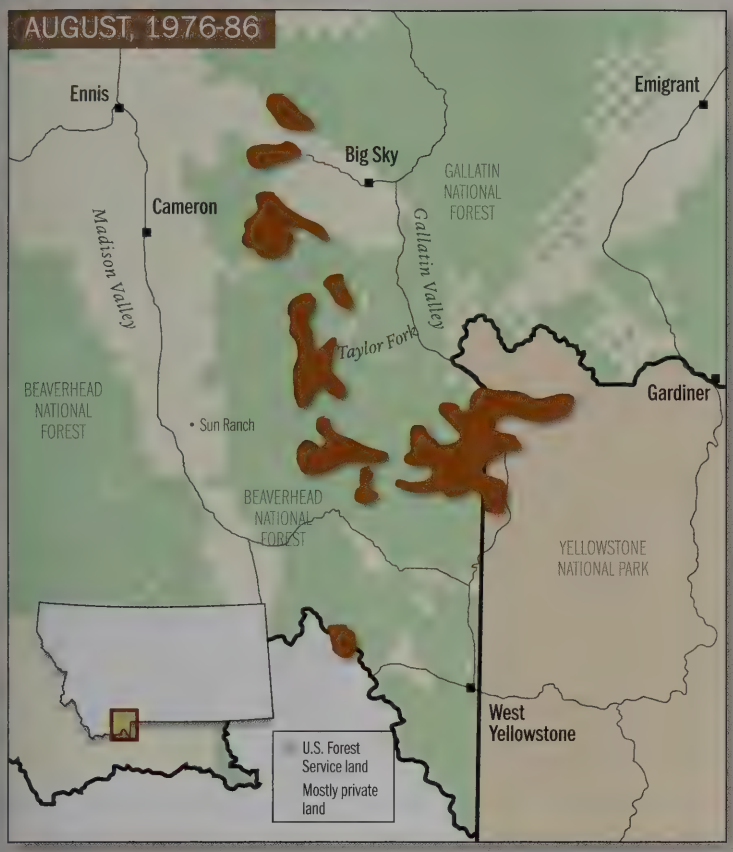
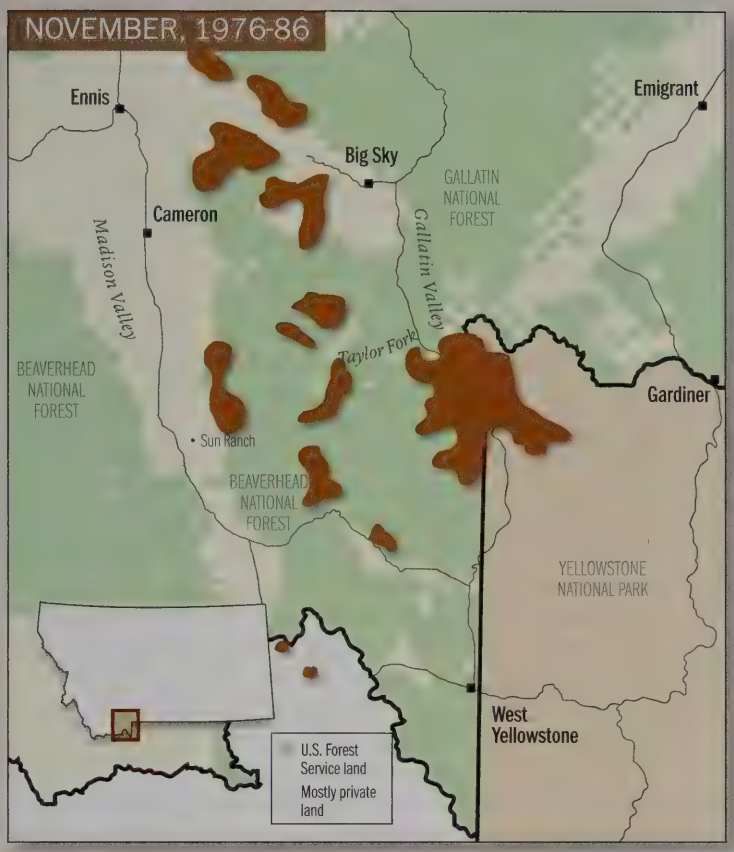
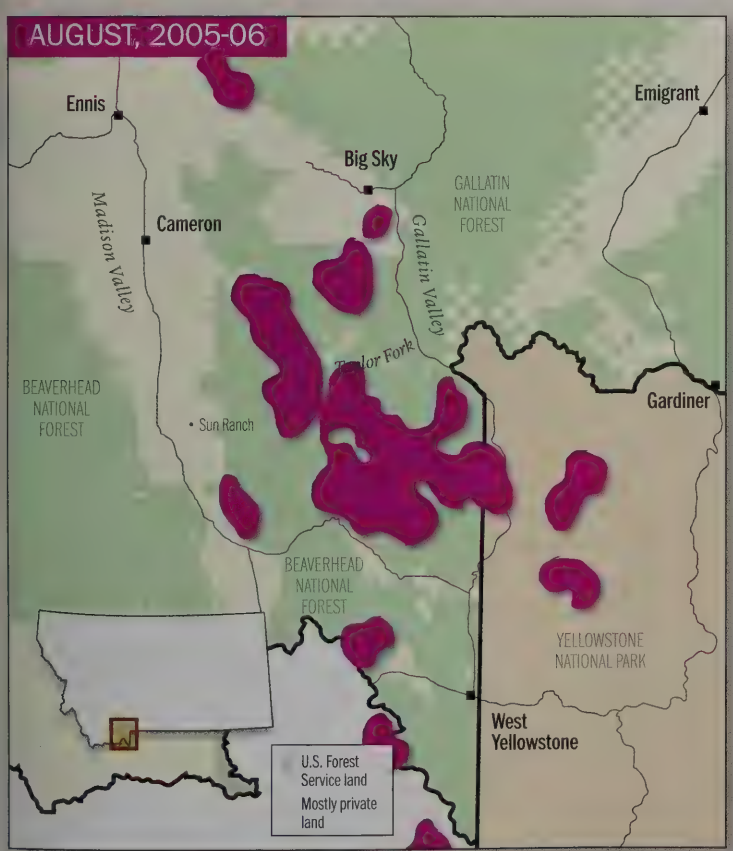
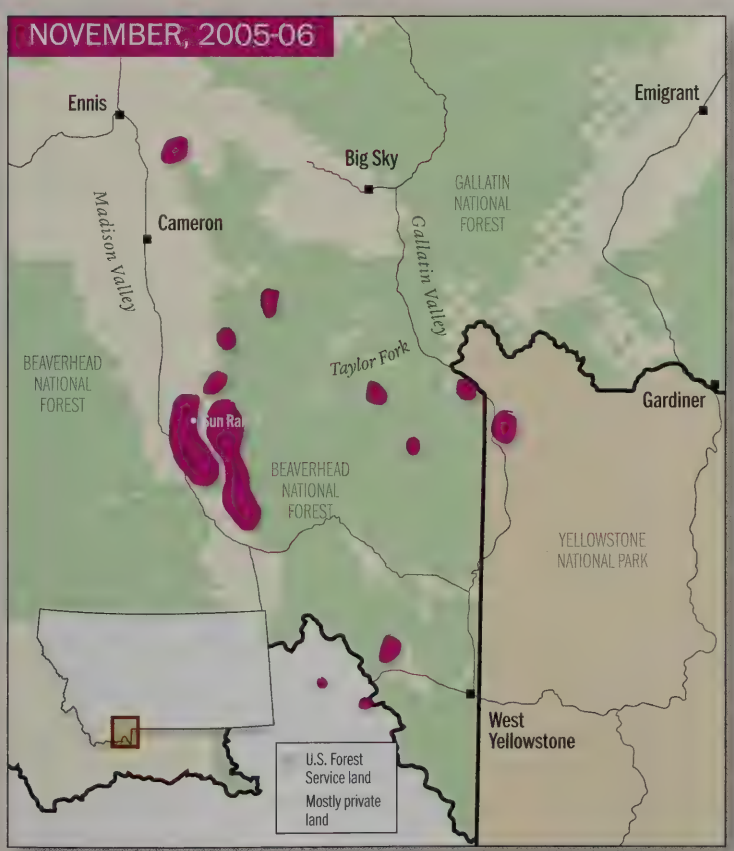




LEARNING TO AVOID HUNTERS Above: The maps show, in brown, general elk locations in August and November during various study years from 1976 to 1986. The locations show elk summering in the Beaverhead and Gallatin National Forests. By start of the firearms elk season in November, most of the elk were still on the national forests, accessible to public hunting. Below: The maps show, in purple, general elk locations in August and November in 2005 and 2006. Elk continue to summer in the national forests, as was the case 20 to 30 years before. The big change comes in November. Now elk have moved almost completely out of the national forests and congregated on the Sun Ranch and other private land generally off-limits to public hunting. "Elk aren't stupid," says one Forest Service biologist. "They go where it's safe and there's lots of food. These days that means private bottomlands that are closed to public hunting."





DATA SOURCE: MONTANA FWP

captured and radio collared 45 cow elk in the western Paradise Valley and followed 49 cow elk previously collared in the Madison Range. Researchers tracked the animals, recording 190,000 separate locations and documenting factors that might cause them to move or stay put. Factors included the ratio of public to private land, human hunting pressure, presence of motorized vehicles, wolf densities, and the amount of forest hiding cover (200-acre parcels of high-elevation timber at least a mile from roads, where elk can escape hunting pressure).

One surprising new finding was that elk were less likely to use hiding cover in national forests than previously believed, unless it was far from motorized vehicle traffic. "It's basically a risk analysis by elk," says Proffitt. "They generally prefer to go down to private land with limited hunting access and longer growing seasons rather than stay in forests, where vegetation may be more sparse and hunting pressure by humans is much greater, even if there's hiding cover up there."

Compounding the problem is that "elk spending more time down on private land may lose their migratory habits and not pass that knowledge on to their young," says Proffitt. Meanwhile, elk that retain the traveling urge are more vulnerable once hunting season comes around. "These days it's mainly migratory elk being harvested, since those are the ones more accessible to hunters," says Proffitt.

Socializing, as much as science, may be part of the solution. FWP, hunting groups, and others will need to meet with landowners who limit elk hunting and find out what they want in exchange for opening their gates.

After analyzing data from the study, Proffitt devised a way to estimate where elk will be in November in each hunting district, based on factors such as the percentage of national forest land or the level of hunting pressure. Says Justin Gude, head of FWP wildlife research, "Now our biologists can recommend regulations aimed at distributing elk where they want them to be, while the Forest Service can use the information to adjust their forest plans."

Possible Solutions

Another part of Proffitt's study, as well as others ongoing in the northern Sapphires and Missouri Breaks, aims to identify how various management activities influence the number of elk on public land and available to hunters. "For instance, do nutritional differences on public versus private land drive these changes [in elk movement]?" she says. "Can we manipulate habitat on public land—maybe with prescribed burns or aspen regeneration or targeted timber harvest that opens areas to sunlight—especially for late summer and early fall, when cows need to put on fat for their next pregnancy?"

Research by Proffitt and others is causing forest managers to rethink elk management policy, says Tomasik. In the past, national forest elk management plans focused on creating hiding cover and security from hunters who use motorized vehicles during the hunting season. "That made sense back when FWP was trying to grow the statewide

BELOW: JESSE LEE VARNADO; ABOVE RIGHT: DUŠAN SMETANA

Landowner versus landowner

If ranchers don't want elk on their property—because the animals eat hay and forage meant for livestock and, in some areas during spring calving season, can increase risk of disease to cattle—then why don't they open their land to public hunting?

For the most part, those landowners do.

When it comes to elk and elk hunting, there are two basic categories of landowners. A growing number have bought ranches then reduced or discontinued the cattle operation. They enjoy having lots of elk on their land—either to see the animals or sell exclusive hunting access, mainly for trophy bulls, via outfitters. The more elk, the better.

That's not the case for nearby working ranchers who are losing hay and grass to overabundant elk in the valley. Because they want elk numbers trimmed, many of these landowners open their property to public hunting.

The problem is, elk are highly mobile. When rancher Johnson allows hunting in November on his working cattle ranch, the animals simply move next door to landowner Wilson's property, which is off-limits to hunting. The animals hang out there all hunting season, not harming Wilson's bottom line because Wilson runs no cattle. Then in December, after the season closes, elk jump the fence and eat Johnson's haystacks and graze his pasture. And if they stick around during calving, in some parts of Montana they can increase the risk of brucellosis transmission to cattle.

"What it can get down to is landowners who don't allow public access doing actual harm to their neighbors' financial situation," says Ken McDonald, head of the FWP Wildlife Division. "It's an issue that needs to be resolved between landowners as much as it is an issue between our department and landowners." ■

NO LONGER ENOUGH? Since the 1980s, national forest managers have created 200-acre blocks of hiding cover where bull elk could escape hunting pressure. As elk increasingly abandon forests for the safety of private bottomlands, managers may need to also find other ways to lure—or push—elk back to the mountains.

elk population," Tomasik says. Dense forest far from roads allowed FWP biologists to provide liberal seasons with no bull harvest restrictions, giving hunters abundant opportunity while ensuring bulls weren't overharvested. That approach, it now turns out, may be insufficient. "In addition to maintaining hiding cover and security to hold elk during hunting seasons, we may need to create more forage that will entice elk, especially cows, to stay on national forests earlier in the year," Tomasik says.

In other words, retain the thick, remote cover but also produce grass to lure elk away from irrigated bottomland.

Another way wildlife managers can move elk to more desirable locations is by adjusting hunting seasons and regulations. "An option might be to temporarily decrease the number of cow tags in some national forest hunting districts," says Gude. "That way you would have less hunting pressure up there for a few years and elk would get used to not being bothered." That would require hunters to give up some current opportunities, says Gude, "but it might be worth the trade-off in producing more accessible elk in the future."

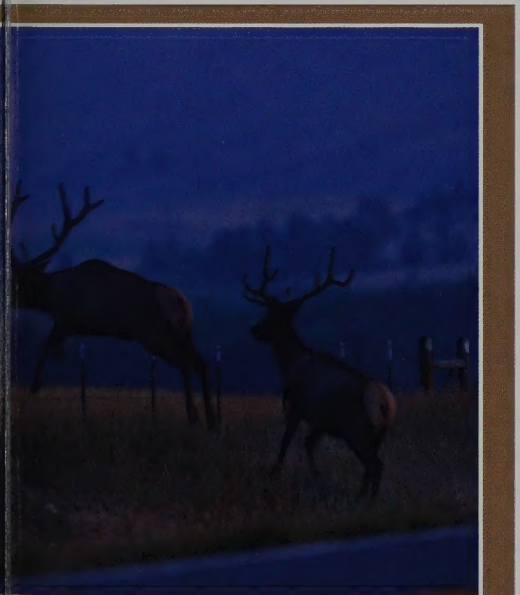
According to McDonald, FWP could also stagger season dates to create random pulses of hunting pressure that keep elk moving—hopefully from private land to public. Or, as it already does in some areas, the department could limit cow hunting to private bottomlands only, making nearby national forests safer for antlerless elk. "For this to work, regulations have to be customized for each area in cooperation with local landowners and hunters, as has been the case in recent years in the Madison, Missouri Breaks, Bitterroot, and Devil's Kitchen areas," says McDonald. "A one-size-fits-all approach won't fly because too many different factors are at work."

Socializing, as much as science, may be part of the solution. FWP, hunting groups, and local communities will need to meet with landowners who limit or prohibit access in hunting districts where elk have abandoned public forests. They'll have to find out what property owners want in exchange for opening their gates—such as, for nonresident landowners, tags, permits, and licenses to be more accessible. And they'll need to make a more compelling case than "it's the public's wildlife" for why more hunters should be allowed on closed properties.

For Mike Harmon, the Taylor Fork hunter, the new elk movement patterns make sense. "Back 150 years ago, elk were in the valleys and we drove them up into the mountains," he says. "Now they're coming back down again to where they used to be." Forest and wildlife managers say that more hunters will need to understand why elk aren't where they once were, what can be done to change that, and that elk management in Montana has been transformed. "Many people still don't comprehend how radically things have changed from 20 or 30 years ago, when FWP was trying to increase herd size," says McDonald. "Now Montana has surpassed elk population objectives in much of the state, and we need to reduce numbers."

McDonald acknowledges that the concept of "too many elk" doesn't register with hunters seeing fewer cows and bulls every fall. "But in most cases, the elk are definitely still in the hunting district," he says. "The problem is that too many are now on private land beyond the reach of hunters. That's the problem we're trying to solve."

To participate in a community group working on local elk management, contact your local FWP wildlife biologist. To comment on the elk habitat component of management plans in a national forest where you hunt, call the supervisor's office and ask if planning is under way and how you can be involved. Participation can range from emailing comments to taking part in meetings and discussions.



HERE THEY COME After the hunting season ends in late November, elk that found refuge on private land off-limits to hunting head to neighboring ranches to eat hay and forage meant for livestock.

Pondering the Elk Hunt

By Bruce Auchly

ILLUSTRATION BY E.R. JENNE

The older I get—just turned 60, with 50 long gone from the rearview mirror—the more I'm convinced that elk hunting is a young person's game.

Two years ago I called in an elk calf and thanked the Almighty it was not a full-grown cow or bull.

That's because I was 3 miles from the truck and, as I slowly made my way down the mountain, groaning under a bulging backpack, I thought to myself: If I break an ankle, I hope someone can identify my remains next spring.

Speaking of downhill, every hunter, especially every elk hunter, should memorize the following: Always shoot uphill of the truck.

As for youth and elk hunting, I ran into a young friend—early 20s, in the military, in shape—who hunts the same area I do. He told me he was on a nearby hill the previous week, spotted elk about 2 miles away, and took off on a run toward them.

When I tell people I run, it's a figure of speech. But when my friend says he runs, he does. He also got his elk. I'm telling you, it's a young person's game.

Another observation: If I shoot an elk one year, why can't I return to the same spot and shoot one there the next year?

Last year I went back to where the elk calf ran to me the previous season and nothing happened. I mean, I did my part. Must be poor wildlife management.

Another question: Why is it that it wasn't until the end of last season that I found a note I wrote to myself the year before: "Next year better boots, better pack."?

Well, at least I found it before the elk season begins this year. Anyone know of a good deal on hunting boots and backpacks?

Another thing: Why is it that year after year I bring too many clothes when it's warm and too few when it's cold? You'd think a person would learn.

One thing I did learn last year is why a wind-swept ridge is called wind-swept.

As I sat on the gale-battered ridge early one morning toward the end of last season, it wasn't long before I actually started to hope that no elk would appear. My fingers were so cold after an hour of sitting still in near-zero windchill that I wasn't sure I could pull the trigger.

You know you're cold when you've eaten your lunch by sunup in a failed attempt to stay warm.

So why, you may ask, do I continue to go elk hunting? Each year it gets harder. The mountains are taller. My muscles ache more.

I could quit and say I'm just getting too old for it. The thing is, I know an 86-year-old man who shot his elk two years ago near Bozeman and spent five days packing it out. So there's the shame factor if I were to hang it up.

Honestly, I don't know.

But I do know that when I go out this fall, I won't squeeze the trigger unless I'm uphill of the truck.

Bruce Auchly manages the FWP regional Information and Education Program in Great Falls.

Western Red Cedar

Thuja plicata **By Charles Bolin**

In many ways the groves of giant western red cedars found in isolated valleys of northwestern Montana are just as spectacular as the state's renowned snow-capped peaks, vast prairies, and blue-ribbon trout streams. The western red cedar is Montana's largest tree, and certainly one of its most beautiful. Strolling among these ancient giants, I'm always awed by their vastness and soothed by the quiet, peaceful, therapeutic surroundings.

Range and Ecology

Western red cedars are found throughout wet, low-elevation forests in northwestern Montana, northern Idaho, and western Washington, Oregon, and British Columbia.

In Montana, the tree grows mainly in the Purcell and Cabinet Mountains, Swan Valley, and Mission and Bitterroot Ranges. Two of the best spots to see massive western red cedars are at the Ross Creek Scenic Area, in the shadow of the Cabinets southwest of Libby, and along the Trail of the Cedars in Glacier National Park, east of Lake McDonald. Both locations contain trees over 100 feet tall and 10 feet or more in diameter.

Despite their thin bark and dense branches, western red cedars are relatively resistant to fire. That's due to their enormous size. Mature western red cedar groves have survived many devastating burns when most neighboring trees were reduced to ash. In fact, fire can benefit cedar groves, reducing competition from other species and adding nutrients to the soil.

Identification

Besides its girth, the most distinguishing feature of the western red cedar is the furrowed gray to reddish-brown bark that runs in deep vertical ridges. The branches, often drooping down then curving upward in a J-shape, hold sprays of soft, green leaves. Instead of the needle leaves found on most conifers, western red cedar leaves are flat and braided. When crushed, they emit a spicy pineapple scent that I find almost intoxicating.

Considering the tree's vast size, the slender cones are surprisingly tiny, ranging from just ⅓ to ½ inch long.

Though some western red cedars in Montana reach nearly 150 feet high, several other tree species here are taller. Yet none is so broad at the base. It is the western red cedar's combination of girth and height that qualifies it as the state's largest tree. This is also one of the longest-lived tree species, growing for 500 to even 1,000 years or more and giving the term "ancient forests" real meaning.

Human Use

Years ago, Indians across the western red cedar's range carved out the trunk to make giant canoes and used the wood and bark for hand tools, baskets, rope, fishing nets, even clothing. Many parts of the tree, especially the pungent oil of the leaves, were used to treat ailments. These days the western red cedar is valued for its tight, straight grain and lack of knots, making it ideal for furniture. The aromatic, rot-resistant wood is also used for cedar chests, as well as posts, decking, shingles, and siding. Its strength, light weight, and warm sound make it ideal for guitar soundboards.

Scientific name

Thuja is from the Greek *thyia* (a fragrant tree), which itself comes from *thyo* (perfume); ***plicata*** is from the Latin *plicare* (to fold), referring to the tree's pleated leaf pattern.

Wildlife Value

Its size alone makes each mature western red cedar an immense island of biodiversity. The trees provide food, shelter, or both to salamanders, squirrels, songbirds, woodpeckers, elk, deer, bears, mountain lions, and dozens of other wildlife species. Their massive canopies provide cooling shade in summer and catch snow and block wind during the cold months.

Conservation Status

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the western red cedar was logged so aggressively that mature trees became nearly as rare as the vanishing woodland caribou that once lived in dense cedar groves. Today older western red cedars are found in many protected sites in Montana, where numbers are increasing—though logging continues to be a threat in several areas. Considering how long some of these giants have been standing, it is likely the western red cedar will be around for a long time to come.

Charles Bolin is a photographer in Nebraska.

STEVEN AKRE; INSET PHOTO: LINDA S. MARTIN

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PARTING SHOT

GRASS GIRLS Whitetail does pause while moving through a tract of CRP in eastern Montana. See page 26 to read how Congress helped deer, ducks, pheasants, songbirds, and other prairie wildlife with conservation provisions in the 2014 Farm Bill, passed in February. Photo by Andrew Kandel.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

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